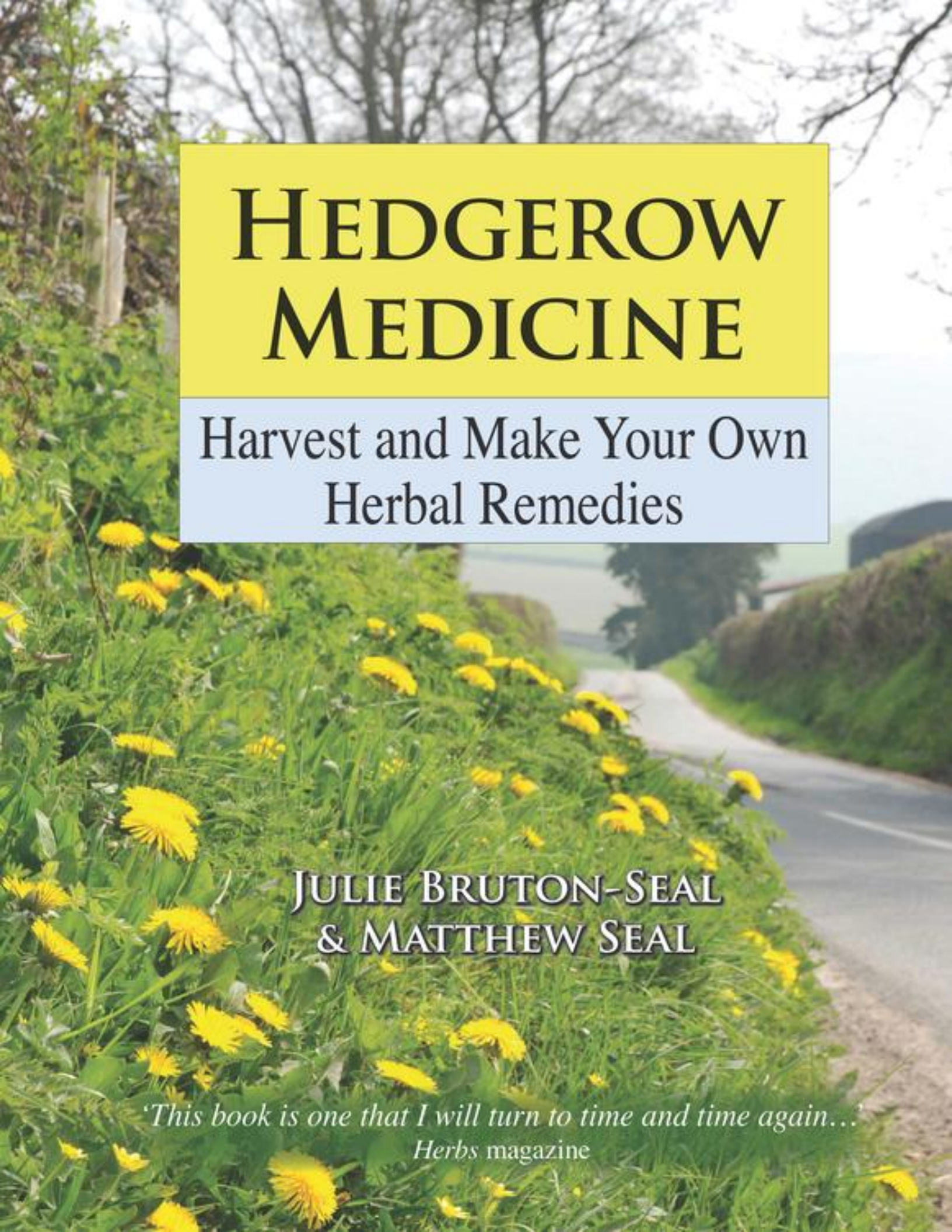
HEDGEROW MEDICINE
Harvest and Make Your Own Herbal Remedies
JULIE BRUTON-SEAL & MATTHEW SEAL
'This book is one that I will turn to time and time again…'
Herbs magazine

Praise for Julie Bruton-Seal and Matthew Seal

Julie Bruton-Seal's long experience as a practising herbalist combined with husband Matthew's publishing know-how has produced a great new herbal for the 21st century. This is the book that I take most recipes from. While there have been many excellent herbals over the years and centuries, this is the most useful to me practically…. *Hedgerow Medicine* has become a popular book, which is unsurprising with its excellent photos and easy to use format.

Davina Wynne-Jones, *Barnsley Gardens*

Hedgerow Medicine is a wonderful book that all herbalists need. It embodies a heartfelt love of herbalism combined with clearly articulated scientific insights. I plan to get some schools here [California] using it and will promote it as much as possible.

David Hoffmann, author of *Holistic Herbal*

I have been browsing the delightful *Hedgerow Medicine*: how beautifully you've done it, how wonderfully accessible is the plant therapy you suggest in its pages. My warmest congratulations to both for a gorgeous and most useful book.

Barbara Griggs, author of *Green Pharmacy*

At last! A herbal with photographs. I have longed for a book like this for years…. It will rapidly become a classic.

Nature's Path

HEDGEROW MEDICINE

Harvest and Make Your Own Herbal Remedies

JULIE BRUTON-SEAL
MATTHEW SEAL

MERLIN UNWIN BOOKS

To our parents

Jen and Des Bartlett
Midge and George Seal

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Preface

This is a book about common British hedgerow plants and their medicinal uses. We began with a list of 100 species, which we thought was a severe selection already, but our publisher wisely persuaded us to concentrate on our top 50 choices in greater depth. These are all wild plants (many also occur as ‘weeds’) that are abundant, easy to identify, cost nothing to pick and in most cases will survive your harvesting. Each has well-known, sometimes forgotten or even novel medicinal values – what the old herbals called the ‘virtues’ of the plant.

Most of the species you find in our pages will be ones you’d expect, such as nettle, elder, hawthorn, dandelion, mugwort, mullein, bramble, rose and burdock; these grow almost everywhere but are actually powerful, proven and significant herbs to which we gladly dedicate most space. Commonness is not to be despised: it means a plant has the survival adaptations needed to accompany and even thrive alongside our changing civilisation. As you will never keep clover or couch grass out of your lawn or red poppy out of your fields forever, we say: take advantage of their medicinal and survival strengths, and use them for your own benefit.

Sometimes we include less likely plants, like the majestic teasel, which we make into a flower essence for joint pain, or lycium, source of the fashionable imported goji berries but actually a British hedgerow species for over 250 years. A few plants seemed to choose us, as when self-heal invaded our garden while we were planning the book, and we looked again at its uses; rosebay and sweet cicely also eased their way in. It was difficult to make a selection, which is bound to be subjective, but all the plants we have included are ones that Julie uses in her herbal practice and has found medicinally effective.

We list the plants alphabetically by familiar common name. Each plant is given only a short description, as it is generally unmistakable, or we describe similar family members that are used interchangeably. In some instances, such as comfrey, when it is important to make an exact and positive identification, we provide precise details. We go on to outline the habitat, distribution, related species and parts used of each plant.

The text blends the history, folklore, botany, economic and other uses of the plants together with their modern herbal applications. Each entry concludes with easy-to-follow recipes and bullet points of main medicinal benefits. We tie the ailments and benefits together by including both in a comprehensive index.

In case it is gripping you to know how we divided the work, Julie the herbalist usually initiated the writing and Matthew the editor completed it, but often we operated the reverse way. The words sometimes came first and sometimes the images.

Julie was our photographer, using a Nikon D80 digital camera. Every image is original and shot for this book; in just a few cases an illustration is reproduced by Julie from an old herbal. Matthew was chauffeur and plant spotter, and fulfilled a lifetime ambition by being key grip on our photo shoots.

We worked together on choice of pictures and design template, but the book’s appearance is essentially the result of another collaboration, that between Julie and InDesign software. Our goal was to make visually stimulating spreads, with a few ‘sumptuous’ full-page pictures, in our publisher’s phrase, and a friendly but informed text. Asked for at least ten larger images, we supplied well over twenty. We hope the armchair reader will be inspired into harvesting action.

We particularly thank practising fellow herbalists Christine Herbert and Paula Stone, who read most of the text and saved us from some embarrassing errors. Needless to say, the opinions expressed here are our own, and we take responsibility for them.

We have acknowledged sources in the notes to the text, and thank copyright holders for permission to include extracts from their work. If we have overlooked or been unable to locate copyright owners we will gladly add details in a later edition.

We are especially grateful to the book’s godparents, Merlin and Karen Unwin, for their forbearance and intrepidity: not many publishers would have entrusted unknown authors with the design, organisation, editing and copy-editing of their own book.

We are grateful to the John Innes Foundation Collection of Rare Botanical Books and Ken Dick, the former Librarian, for wonderful access to a splendid botanical library, with its added virtue of being situated so close to our home; we also thank the British Library and Norfolk Record Office for unfailing help.

We travelled widely over England and Wales in pursuit of our plants, and thank Karin and Peter Haile for herbal hospitality. There are too many delightful and helpful B&B owners to name individually, so we’ll simply recommend Alastair Sawday’s books and website as a guide to lovely places to stay.

The book was planned in early 2006, with photography in earnest from autumn 2006 into autumn 2007. This tight schedule meant we had a calendar year for everything. We had one shot, sometimes literally, at some plants, and fell foul of the weather in the wet spring and summer of 2007, notably for hawthorn flowers. We did get some shots, as the vignette shows, but never the stunning big landscape view we wanted. Many photos were taken from beneath the protection of an umbrella held by the intrepid, soaked key grip. We also had some close scrapes, such as finding bilberries in Surrey and wood betony in Lincolnshire when we'd almost given up on them.

We shouldn't end without thanking the plants. Hedgerow medicine-harvesting, like foraging for wild food, is best done with respect for both habitat and individual plants. In the vervain entry we quote an old prayer of thanks used when picking it; we received gifts from all fifty of our plants. And we now begin to understand why Dutch herbalist Herman Boerhaave would lift his hat in respect whenever he walked by 'mother elder'.

Julie Bruton-Seal & Matthew Seal
Ashwellthorpe, Norfolk
January 2008

Introduction

The title ‘hedgerow medicine’ is of our own devising, though some people we have talked to imagine it is much older.

We use ‘hedgerow’ loosely, to indicate wild plants of the countryside. In doing this we feel supported by the original Anglo-Saxon term *haga* or *haeg* for hedge, which conveyed the idea of any physical boundary, whether of vegetation, a fence, wall or earth bank, between two properties or fields.

The plants we have selected are found in various habitats, including but not limited to hedgerows. So do not be surprised to see pictures here of plants growing on cliff scree, an abbey wall or open moorland. Quite a few of our plants are happy in cities, inhabiting waste land and parks or cracks in paving.

If we give ourselves some latitude in the first part of our title, what of ‘medicine’? Here we narrow things down, starting from the position that herbal medicines are valid, and that readers will be willing to look at making herbal remedies rather than buying standardised extracts of herbs in health shops.

We do not intend to decry either pharmaceutical or manufactured herbal products, for clearly both have their place and many people want them. What we’d prefer to do is make a positive case for wild plants.

We begin with an quotation from a 2004 Kew survey of *Britain’s Wild Harvest*. In terms of sourcing herbal medicines, it pointed out that Britain is one of the world’s major importers of herbs, but ‘despite this interest our own wild species play a remarkably small role in this market. Almost all of the tinctures, creams or infusions we use derive from plants that we import or cultivate.’

Using British wild species for herbal remedies saves on imports and air miles; hedgerow medicines are not only cheap, they are free. There is also a sustainability issue: many popular imported herbal medicines have negative environmental effects in their place of origin. Our plants are common, local, often invasive plants that are written off as weeds.

An excellent reason to harvest and make your own local herbal medicines is the pleasure the whole process brings. You will also have the peace of mind of knowing exactly what is in your medicines. The again, the current regulatory environment is running against over-the-counter herbal preparations, and there is almost certain to be less choice and more control in future. All in all, the best option is to learn to make your own remedies.

Do please be aware that this book is intended to be a general guide to plant medicines and is not specific to personal circumstances or meant to replace a professional consultation. Do not self-diagnose or self-treat for serious or long-term conditions without consulting a qualified herbal or medical practitioner.

Having said that, we hope we can show you how easy it is to make your own remedies from wild plants you have gathered. You will soon build up a home medicine cabinet better than anything you could buy. We support you in taking responsibility for your own health, and wish you well in seeking the healing virtues offered by the plants all around us.

Harvesting from the hedgerow

Harvesting wild plants for food or medicine is a great pleasure, and healing in its own right. We all need the company of plants and wild places in our lives, whether this is in an old wood, a remote moor or seashore, just down the street or even in our own garden. Gathering herbs for free is the beginning of a valuable and therapeutic relationship with the wild. Here are a few basic guidelines to help you get started.

Why pay others to frolic in the luscious gardens of Earth, picking flowers and enjoying themselves making herbal products? You can do all that frolicking, immersing yourself in wondrous herbal beauty, and uplifting your mind and spirit. Making your own herbal medicine both enhances your happiness and boosts your immune system.
– Green (2000)

When collecting, try to choose a place where the plant you are harvesting is abundant and vibrant. Woods, fields and minor roads are best, though many of our fifty plants are also found in the city. Avoiding heavy traffic is safer for you and your lungs, and plants growing in quiet places are less polluted. Hedgerows next to fields may receive crop sprays.

We usually want to harvest herbs when they are at their lushest. It's best to pick on a dry day, after the morning dew has burned off. For St John's wort and aromatic plants the energy of the sun is really important, so wait for a hot day and pick while the sun is high in the sky, ideally just before noon.

Perhaps the most important thing is to ensure you have the right plant. A good field guide is essential – we like *Wild Flowers of Britain & Ireland* by Blamey, Fitter and Fitter. Many herbalists offer herb walks, so do contact practitioners in your area: check our Resources pages for professional organisations. For distribution maps and identifications, the Botanical Society of the British Isles has a good website: see www.bsbi.net.org.

Harvest only what you need and will use; leave some of the plant so it will grow back. When picking ‘above-ground parts’ of a plant, only take the top half to two-thirds. Never harvest a plant if it is the only one in a particular area.

We have included a few roots in our recipes. It is important not to over-harvest these, even though most of the plants we have selected are widespread and classed as weeds. The law states that you must seek the permission of the landowner before you dig up roots, if this is not on your own land (see p. 198 for more on law).

Collecting equipment is simple: think carrier bags or a basket, and perhaps gloves, scissors or secateurs. If you are harvesting roots take a shovel or digging fork.

A quiet Norfolk country road in May, with hawthorn flowering and a healthy undergrowth of nettles and cleavers: an invitation to the hedgerow harvest.

Using your hedgerow harvest

Herbs can be used in many different ways. Simplest of all is nibbling on the fresh plant, crushing the leaves to apply them as a poultice or perhaps boiling up some leaves as a tea. Many of the plants discussed in this book are foods as well as medicines, and incorporating them seasonally in your diet is a tasty and enjoyable way to improve your health.

But because fresh herbs aren't available year round or may not grow right on your doorstep, you may want to preserve them for later use. Follow these guidelines.

Equipment needed

You don't need any special equipment for making your own hedgerow medicines. You probably already have most of what you need. Kitchen basics like a teapot, measuring jugs, saucepans and a blender are all useful, as are jam-making supplies such as a jelly bag and jam jars. A

mortar and pestle are useful but not essential. You'll also need jars and bottles, and labels for these.

There is a list of suppliers at the end of the book to help you source any supplies or ingredients you may need (see page 202).

It is a good idea to have a notebook to write down your experiences, so you'll have a record for yourself and can repeat successes. Who knows, it could become a future family heirloom like the stillroom books of old!

Drying herbs

The simplest way to preserve a plant is to dry it, and then use the dried part as a tea (infusion or decoction: see opposite). Dried plant material can also go into tinctures, infused oils and other preparations, though these are often made directly from fresh plants.

To dry herbs, tie them in small bundles and hang these from the rafters or a laundry airer, or spread the herbs on a sheet of brown paper or a screen. (Avoid using newspaper as the inks contain toxic chemicals.) You can easily make your own drying screen by stapling some mosquito netting or other open-weave fabric to a wooden frame. This is ideal, as the air can circulate around the plant, and yet you won't lose any small flowers or leaves that are loose.

Generally, plants are best dried out of the sun. An airing cupboard works well, particularly in damp weather.

Storing dried herbs

Once the plant is crisply dry, you can discard any larger stalks. Whole leaves and flowers will keep best, but if they are large you may want to crumble them so they take up less space. They will be easier to measure for teas etc. if they are crumbled before use.

Dried herbs can be stored in brown paper bags or in airtight containers such as sweet jars or plastic tubs, in a cool place. If your container is made of clear glass or other transparent material, keep it in the dark as light will fade leaves and flowers quite quickly. Brown glass jars are

excellent – we have happily worked our way through quantities of hot chocolate in order to build up a collection of these!

Dried herbs will usually keep for a year, until you can replace them with a fresh harvest. Roots and bark keep longer than leaves and flowers.

Teas: infusions and decoctions

The simplest way to make a plant extract is with hot water. Use fresh or dried herbs. An **infusion**, where hot water is poured over the herb and left to steep for several minutes, is the usual method for a tea of leaves and flowers.

Part of a summer's hedgerow harvest: (*from left*) St John's wort in olive oil; dried mugwort; dandelion flower oil; raspberry vinegar; meadowsweet ghee; meadowsweet, mugwort and mint in white wine; rosehip oxymel

A **decoction**, where the herb is simmered or boiled in water for some time, is needed for roots and bark. Infusions and decoctions can also be used as mouthwashes, gargles, eyebaths, fomentations and douches.

Tinctures

While the term tincture can refer to any liquid extract of a plant, what is usually meant is an alcohol and water extract. Many plant constituents dissolve more easily in a mixture of alcohol and water than in pure water. There is the added advantage of the alcohol being a preservative, allowing the extract to be stored for several years. The alcohol content of the finished extract needs to be at least 20% to adequately preserve it. Most commercially produced tinctures have a minimum alcohol content of 25%. A higher concentration is needed to extract more resinous substances, such as myrrh resin.

For making your own tinctures, vodka is preferred as it has no flavour of its own, and allows the taste of the herbs to come through. Whisky, brandy or rum work quite well too. Wine is good, especially for dried herbs, but will not have as long a shelf life.

To make a tincture, you simply fill a jar with the herb and top up with alcohol, or you can put the whole lot in the blender first. The mixture is then kept out of the light for anything from a day to a month to infuse before being strained and bottled. Tinctures are convenient to store and to

take. We find amber or blue glass jars best for keeping, although clear bottles will let you enjoy the colours of your tinctures. Store them in a cool place. Kept properly, most tinctures have a shelf life of around five years. They are rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream, and alcohol makes the herbal preparation more heating and dispersing in its effect.

Wines and beers

Many herbs can be brewed into wines and beers, which will retain the medicinal virtues of the plants. Elderberry wine and nettle beer are traditional, but don't forget that ordinary beer is brewed with hops, a medicinal plant.

Glycerites

Vegetable glycerine is extracted from palm or other oil, and is a sweet, syrupy substance. It is particularly good in making medicines for children, and for soothing preparations intended for the throat and digestive tract, or coughs. A glycerite will keep well as long as the concentration of glycerine is at least 50% to 60% in the finished product.

Glycerine does not extract most plant constituents as well as alcohol does, but is effective for flowers such as red poppies, roses and St John's wort. Glycerites are made the same way as tinctures, except the jar is kept in the sun or in a warm place to infuse.

Glycerine is a good preservative for fresh plant juices, in which half fresh plant juice and half glycerine are mixed, as it keeps the juice green and in suspension better than alcohol. This preparation is called a **succus**.

Vinegars
Another way to extract and preserve plant material is to use vinegar. Some plant constituents extract better in an acidic medium, making vinegar the perfect choice. Herbal vinegars are often made from pleasant-tasting herbs, and used in salad dressings and for cooking. They are also a good addition to the bath or for rinsing hair, as the acetic acid of the vinegar helps restore the natural protective acid pH of the body's exterior. Cider vinegar is a remedy for colds and other viruses, so it is a good solvent for herbs for these conditions.

Herbal honeys
Honey has natural antibiotic and antiseptic properties, so is an excellent vehicle for medicines to fight infection. It can be applied topically to wounds and burns. Local honey can help prevent hayfever attacks.

Honey is naturally sweet, making it palatable for medicines for children. It is also particularly suited to medicines for the throat and respiratory system as it is soothing and also clears congestion. Herb-infused honeys are made the same way as glycerites, or can be gently heated in a bain-marie.

Oxymels
An oxymel is a preparation of honey and vinegar. Oxymels were once popular as cordials, both in Middle Eastern and European traditions. They are particularly good for cold and 'flu remedies. Honey can be added to a herb-infused vinegar, or an infused honey can be used as well.

Electuaries
Make these by stirring powdered dried herbs into honey or glycerine to make a paste. Electuaries are good as children's remedies, and are often used to soothe the digestive tract. This is also a good way to prepare tonic herbs.

Syrups
Syrups are made by boiling the herb with sugar and water. The sugar acts as a preservative, and can help extract the plant material. Syrups

generally keep well, especially the thicker ones containing more sugar, as long as they are stored in sterilised bottles.

They are particularly suitable for children because of their sweet taste, and are generally soothing.

Herbal sweets

While we are not recommending large amounts of sugar as being healthy, herbal sweets such as coltsfoot rock and peppermints are a traditional way of taking herbs in a pleasurable way.

Plant essences

Plant essences, usually flower essences, differ from other herbal preparations in that they only contain the vibrational energy of the plant, and none of the plant chemistry. To make an essence, the flowers or other plant parts are usually put in water in a glass bowl and left to infuse in the sun for a couple of hours, as in the instructions for our self-heal essence. This essence is then preserved with brandy, and diluted for use.

Infused oils

Oil is mostly used to extract plants for external use on the skin, but infused oils can equally well be taken internally. Like vinegars, they are good in salad dressings and in cooking.

We prefer extra virgin olive oil as a base, as it does not go rancid like many polyunsaturated oils do. Other oils, such as coconut and sesame, may be chosen because of their individual characteristics.

Infused oils are also known as macerated oils, and should not be confused with essential oils, which are aromatic oils isolated by distilling the plant material.

Ointments or salves

Ointments or salves are rubbed onto the skin. The simplest ointments are made by adding beeswax to an infused oil and heating until the beeswax has melted. The amount of wax needed will vary, depending on the climate or temperature in which it will be used, with more wax needed in hotter climates or weather.

Ointments made this way have a very good shelf life. They absorb well, while providing a protective layer on top of the skin.

Ointments can also be made with animal fats or hard plant fats such as cocoa butter.

Nettle, from Woodville's *Medical Botany* (1790–3)

Butters and ghees

Butter can be used instead of oil to extract herbs, and, once clarified by simmering, it keeps well without refrigeration, making a simple ointment. Clarified butter is a staple in Indian cooking and medicine, where it is called ghee. It is soothing on the skin and absorbs well. Herbal butters and ghees can also be used as food.

Skin creams

Creams are a mixture of a water-based preparation with an oil-based one, to make an emulsion. Creams are absorbed into the skin more rapidly than ointments, but have the disadvantages of being more difficult to make and not keeping as well. Essential oils can be added to help preserve creams, and they keep best if refrigerated.

Poultices

The simplest poultice is mashed fresh herb put on to the skin, as when you crush a ribwort leaf and apply it to a wasp sting. Poultices can be made from fresh herb juice mixed with slippery elm powder or simply flour, or from dried herb moistened with hot water or vinegar.

Change the poultice every few hours and keep it in place with a bandage or sticking plaster.

Fomentations or compresses

A fomentation or compress is an infusion or a decoction applied externally. Simply soak a flannel or bandage in the warm or cold liquid, and apply. Hot fomentations are used to disperse and clear, and are good for conditions as varied as backache, joint pain, boils and acne. Hot fomentations need to be refreshed frequently once they cool down.

Cold fomentations can be used for cases of inflammation or for headaches. Alternating hot and cold fomentations works well for sprains and other injuries.

Elderflower, from Woodville's *Medical Botany* (1790–3);

Embrocations or liniments

Embrocations or liniments are used in massage, with the herbs in an oil or alcohol base or a mixture of the two. Absorbed quickly through the skin, they can readily relieve muscle tension, pain and inflammation, and speed the healing of injuries.

Baths

Herbs can be added conveniently to bathwater by tying a sock or cloth full of dried or fresh herb to the hot tap as you run the bath, or by adding a few cups of an infusion or decoction. Herbal vinegars and oils can also be added to bath water, as can essential oils.

Besides full baths, hand and foot baths can be very effective, as can sitz or hip baths where only your bottom is in the water.

Douches

Herbal infusions or decoctions can be used once they have cooled as douches for vaginal infections or inflammation.

Hedgerow Medicine

Elder in the Lincolnshire Wolds, June

Agrimony

Agrimony

Agrimonia eupatoria, A. procera

Agrimony stops bleeding of all sorts, and is used in trauma treatment and surgery in Chinese hospitals. It helps relieve pain too, and has a long tradition as a wound herb as well as for treating liver, digestive and urinary tract problems.

Agrimony tightens and tones the tissues, and, in a seeming contradiction, also relaxes tension, both physical and mental. This is the herb for when you're feeling frazzled, when stress and tension or pain are causing torment.

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: Upright perennials with spikes of yellow flowers up to 60cm.

Habitat: Meadows and roadsides/grassy places.

Distribution: Throughout the British Isles except for the north of Scotland and the Welsh mountains, but more common in the south. Native to Europe, introduced to North America.

Related species: There are around 15 species of agrimony found in northern temperate regions and South America. In North America, tall hairy agrimony (*A. gryposepala*) is used interchangeably with European species. In China, *xian he cao* (*A. pilosa*) is used medicinally, mainly for bleeding and diarrhoea. Cinquefoil and tormentil are old medicinal herbs with very similar properties to agrimony.

Parts used: Above-ground parts, when in flower in summer.

You can hardly miss this tall and bright summer hedgerow herb, which readily earns its old name of church steeples. The sticky burrs that cling to passers-by lie behind another name, cocklebur.

Agrimony used to be a significant herb in the European tradition, once known as the Anglo-Saxon healing plant 'garclive', but it is underused

and underrated in modern western herbalism.

Agrimonia eupatoria is the ‘official’ agrimony, but John Parkinson in *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640) preferred fragrant agrimony, *Agrimonia procera*, if available. The two can be used interchangeably.

In Chinese medicine, *A. pilosa* is the species used, and its name, *xian he cao*, translates as ‘immortal crane herb’, which gives an idea of the reverence in which it is held. It is used in surgery and trauma treatment to stop bleeding, and has been found to be effective against *Trichomonas* vaginal infections and tapeworms, as also for dysentery and chronic diarrhoea.

Dr Edward Bach chose agrimony as one of his 38 flower essences. It is for people who soldier on, who say everything is fine when it is not, hiding inner turmoil behind a cheerful facade and ignoring the darker side of life. The out-of-balance agrimony person will sometimes resort to alcohol, drugs or adrenaline-producing sports to avoid dealing with life issues.

Agrimony, from Woodville’s *Medical Botany* (1790–3)

Use agrimony for…

Contemporary American herbalist Matthew Wood has written more deeply about agrimony than anybody else. He uses it as a flower essence, herbal tincture and homeopathic preparation, and has researched it in great detail, expanding on the traditional picture of the plant. Wood calls agrimony ‘the bad hair day remedy’ – imagine the cartoon picture of a cat that has had a fright or put its paw into an electric socket. He has found it works for people with mental and physical tension or work-related stress, with ‘pain that makes them hold their breath’ and a range of other conditions.

… there are few of our wild flowers which are in more esteem with the village herbalist than the agrimony. Every gatherer of simples knows it well.
– Pratt (1857)

Agrimony is a great herb for treating intermittent fever and chills, or alternating constipation and diarrhoea, as it helps the body to recover a

working balance between extremes, by releasing the tension and constricted energy that cause such problems.

Pain is very often associated with constriction, with one condition reinforcing the other. Agrimony can help release us from this self-perpetuating spiral, allowing body and mind to relax and restorative healing to begin as blood and energy flow are brought back to normal.

Agrimony is a wonderful wound herb, as it rapidly stops bleeding and also relieves pain. It is thought that a high tannin and vitamin K content account for its remarkable coagulation properties. In the 1400s agrimony was picked to make ‘arquebusade water’, to staunch bleeding inflicted by the arquebus or hand gun.

Agrimony works well for burns too – put tincture directly on the burn and take a few drops internally; repeat until pain subsides.

Agrimony has an affinity for the liver and digestive tract, working to co-ordinate their functions. John Parkinson – herbalist to King Charles I – wrote in 1640 that ‘it openeth the obstructions of the Liver, and cleanseth it; it helpeth the jaundise, and strengthneth the inward parts, and is very beneficiall to the bowels, and healeth their inward woundings and bruises or hurts’. All these are uses borne out today and explained by the herb’s bitter and astringent qualities.

Agrimony’s other main affinity is for the urinary tract, being used to good effect to ease the pain of kidney stones, irritable bladder and chronic cystitis. It can be given safely to children for bedwetting and anxiety about potty training, and to the elderly for incontinence.

Harvesting agrimony

Harvest when the plant is in bloom in the summer, picking the flower spike and some leaves. For agrimony tea, dry them in the shade until crisp, and then strip the flowers and leaves off the stems, discarding the stems. Store in brown paper bags or glass jars, in a cool dry place.

Agrimony tea

Use 1–2 teaspoonfuls of **dried agrimony** per cup of **boiling water**, infused for 10 to 15 minutes. The tea has a pleasant taste and odour, and was often used as a country beverage, especially when imported tea was expensive.

Dose: The tea can be drunk three times a day, or used when cool as an eyewash or gargle for gum irritations and sore throats.

Agrimony tea
- eyewash, conjunctivitis
- gargle for mouth & gum or throat problems
- in footbath for athlete's foot
- in bath for sprains & strained muscles

Agrimony bath

Make a strong tea with a handful of **dried agrimony** infused in 500ml **boiling water** for 20 minutes.

Poured hot into a foot bath, this soothes athlete's foot or sprained ankles; added to a hot bath it helps strained muscles after exercise, and general

tension that has stiffened the muscles, back and joints.

Agrimony tincture

To make agrimony tincture, pick the **flowers and leaves** on a bright sunny day. Pack them into a glass jar large enough to hold your harvest – clean jam jars work well – and pour in enough **brandy or vodka** to cover them. Put the lid on the jar and keep it in a dark cupboard for six weeks, shaking it every few days. Strain off the liquid, bottle and label.

Amber or blue glass bottles will protect your tincture from UV light. If you use clear glass bottles, you will need to keep your tincture in a dark cupboard. It doesn't need to be refrigerated and should keep for several years, although it is best to make a fresh batch every summer if you can.

Dose: For tension or interstitial cystitis: 3–5 drops in a little water three times a day; as an astringent to tone tissues (as in diarrhoea), half a teaspoonful in water three times daily.

The tincture can be used as a first-aid remedy for burns. First cool the burn thoroughly by holding it under water running from the cold tap for several minutes. You can just pour a little tincture onto the burn, but for best results, wet a cotton ball with the tincture and hold it in place until the burn stops hurting.

Agrimony tincture

- appendicitis
- urinary incontinence
- potty training
- cystitis
- weak digestion
- diarrhoea/constipation
- tension
- irritable bladder
- asthma
- childhood diarrhoea
- burns

Bilberry

Vaccinium myrtillus **Blaeberry, Whortleberry**

Bilberries are one of the best herbs for the eyes and eyesight. They also strengthen the veins and capillaries, so are used for fragile and varicose veins.

The leaves are healing too, being effective for urinary tract infections and helping to regulate blood sugar levels.

Ericaceae Heather family

Description: A short deciduous shrub with green twigs, pink flowers and bluish-black berries.

Habitat: Heathland, moors and woods with acid soils.

Distribution: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the north-west and south of England. Circumboreal, across northern Europe, northern Asia, and in western North America.

Related species: Bog bilberry (*V. uliginosum*) is taller and mainly found in Scotland. The North American blueberry (*V. corymbosum*) is very similar and is naturalised in Dorset.

Parts used: Berries and leaves picked in summer.

Bilberry is a plant of heath and moor, and woods with acid soils. It is an ancient source of food and medicine in the more upland areas of the British Isles but is found only locally in the east and south. Its long period of use is reflected in colourful regional names: bilberry in northern England, blaeberry or blueberry in Scotland, wimberry in Shropshire, whortleberry in south-eastern England and huckleberry in the Midlands (and later exported to America).

These are wild-growing bilberries, but there is an increasing cultivated acreage of the related and larger, but less tasty, American blueberry (*V. corymbosum*) in Dorset, Suffolk and other places.

Bilberry is not wild-harvested as a local cottage industry as much as formerly. Gathering bilberries in high summer was once a regular family and social occasion in its growing areas. The main food harvest, usually grain or potatoes, was about to begin, but the timing of early August was just right for a day celebrating bilberries.

Whether Fraughan Sunday in Ireland (from Gaelic for ‘that which grows in the heather’), whort or hurt day in southern England, Laa Luanya in the Isle of Man, and equivalent August picking days in Wales, Scotland and the south-west, the pattern was similar.

Whole communities would visit hill tops, woods, lakes or holy wells, and the more assiduous would pick bilberries in rush or willow baskets. This was a rare day out, and it was a noisy, happy and often drunken occasion. It had predictable consequences, with unmarried boys and girls, off the leash for once, taking the chance to slip away and have more personal kinds of fun.

In Yorkshire, there was a more sober bilberry connection, with bilberry pies the traditional fare of funeral teas: berries mixed with sugar and lemon juice were baked in crusty pastry. Bilberry pies were known there as ‘mucky-mouth pies’ because they stained your hands and mouth blue, though still deliciously worth the trouble.

Bilberry is a wild plant, rarely cultivated, and you must gather it for yourself if you want it. Picking bilberries takes the present-day forager as close to being a hunter-gatherer as one can get. For our ancestors, the harvest was more than recreational, it was an important source of nutrition.

Picking the berries is the perfect excuse to get out into wild nature, as bilberry grows on windswept moors or in heathy woodland. You have to get down to it on all fours to gather, especially on the moors where the plants are very low-growing.

Harvesting the low-lying fruit was and is backaching work, but bilberries are so intensely flavourful and so loaded with nutritional benefits that it is still worth the effort today. Where commercial gathering was undertaken, as in Gwent, the process was sometimes eased by a toothed metal comb or rake, the *peigne*, named from a French tool, which could remove the berries from their stems. The fruit would be sold via dealers to jam-making factories, and sometimes for dyeing.

The dealers were reported as being annoyed in 1917 and 1918 when the bilberry crop was requisitioned for wartime dyeing needs and they made less on the deal than with the usual jam.

Anthocyanins

These are a class of flavonoid compounds, found in high levels in bilberries.

Anthocyanins are pigments that give red or blue colour to blackberries, elderberries, hawthorn berries, cherries and many other fruits and vegetables.

These compounds are powerful antioxidants that are attracting a lot of attention in nutritional research.

Their potential health benefits include easing the effects of ageing, reducing

inflammation and increasing insulin production.

Anthocyanins also protect the blood vessels and have a range of anti-cancer effects.

The berries made more than jam, going into wine and liqueurs in Scotland and on the Continent. As well as a purple dye, in medieval times the bilberry was also tried as a writing ink and paint. Sources of purply-blue paint became increasingly important in the Middle Ages as colouring in depictions of the Virgin Mary's gown.

It is a pity they [bilberries] *are used no more in physic than they are.*
– Culpeper (1653)

… the first and most indispensable of all the tinctures in our family medicine chest.
– Abbé Kneipp (1821–97), on fresh bilberry tincture

Bilberries have always been found nutritious and safe to eat fresh; also they are not spiny and only have small internal pips. They are equally good dried for later use in the home or while travelling. However, they are so delicious eaten straight off the bush or fresh with a little cream that you may never have any left to preserve.

Bilberries have remained a favourite for their sweet, deep-toned and slightly astringent flavour in pies, jams and syrups. Commercial jam-makers appreciated them because they have fewer seeds than most other soft fruits and also more pectin. This meant that less sugar was needed to set them, one kilogram of sugar setting two kilos of fruit (other fruit recipes usually specify about equal amounts of fruit and sugar). No wonder bilberry made a cheap and popular jam, one also rich in vitamins C and A, and healthier because it had less sugar.

Use bilberry for…

There's an interesting story about bilberry jam that neatly links its commercial and medicinal uses. Back in the early days of the Second World War, British pilots going on night missions chanced on the fact that eating bilberry jam sandwiches before flying would improve their nightsight. This all might seem 'jolly prang' apocryphal, but research has confirmed that taking bilberry stimulates production of retinal purple, known to be integral to night vision.

The berry's eyesight benefits are now recognised as also including treatment of glaucoma, cataract and general eye fatigue. Bilberry seems to work by its tonic effect on the small blood vessels of the eye, thereby improving the microcirculation.

So taking bilberry as a tea, syrup, wine, dried fruit and yes, a jam, is officially good for eyes as well as your taste buds!

This is a relatively new feature of bilberry's repertoire. Mrs Grieve, the modern standard among British herbals, published in 1931, doesn't mention taking bilberry for eyesight. But, as you come to expect from reading Mrs Grieve, she is thorough on historical uses.

So she mentions that the berries, being diuretic, antibacterial and disinfectant, as well as mildly astringent, are an old remedy for diarrhoea, dysentery, gastroenteritis and the like. A bilberry syrup was traditionally made in Scotland for diarrhoea. Eating a handful of the dried berries works well too.

The berry tea was used for treating bedwetting in children, and to dilate blood vessels of the body, in the same way as described for the eye. The tea is valuable for varicose veins and haemorrhoids, strengthening vein and capillary walls. The berries mashed into a paste are applied to haemorrhoids.

Bilberry leaves are a valuable herbal medicine in their own right, with a slightly different range of qualities, although often used in combination with the berries. The leaves are deciduous, and turn a beautiful red in autumn before they fall.

The particular and long-appreciated effect of the leaves is as an antiseptic tea for urogenital tract inflammation, especially of the bladder. This tea can also be drunk for ulcers, including of the mouth and tonsils.

Bilberry leaves are known to be hypoglaecemic, i.e. they reduce blood sugar levels, and are used successfully in treating late-onset diabetes. This is a slow-acting treatment, however, and taking the tea for long periods may lead to a build-up of tannins that is counter-productive. Some sources suggest using the leaf tea for only three weeks at a time; others say it is best with strawberry leaves.

Bilberry flowers on the Long Mynd, Shropshire, April

Many a lad met his wife on Blaeberry Sunday.
– traditional Irish saying

This fruit and its relatives … have been used traditionally for problems with visual acuity. And scientific research has validated this folk medicine approach.
– Duke (1997)

Julie uses bilberry syrup for eyesight and vascular problems. She says:

‘A friend asked me to make up bilberry syrup for her elderly neighbour. This lady had a lot of aching and discomfort in her legs from varicose veins but was about to go on a long walk, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. She completed the pilgrimage successfully, walking several hundred kilometres, commenting that she could “feel her veins tightening up” when she took the syrup.’

Bilberry combines well with ginkgo tincture or glycerite for eye problems. Julie’s father has been taking this combination ever since he had surgery for a detached retina many years ago. His eye surgeon was initially sceptical, but checked into the research and now regularly recommends both these herbs to his patients.

Julie has used this combination for macular degeneration or retinal tears. Two cases stand out, both people with small tears in the retina. These were not bad enough to warrant surgery, but were intensely worrying to the people concerned, who came to see her to learn if further damage could be prevented.

In both cases, the patients went back to their eye specialists after taking bilberry and ginkgo for several months, and the specialists said words to the effect of ‘but there’s nothing there, we must have made a mistake when we looked at your eyes initially’. Not everyone may be as fortunate, but bilberry certainly has an important role to play in promoting and restoring eye health.

A wider-angle view of bilberry plants on the Long Mynd: picking the berries is a low-down job!

Bilberry syrup

Place your **bilberries** in a saucepan with just enough **water** to cover them. Simmer gently for half an hour, then leave to cool before squeezing out as much of the liquid as possible using a jelly bag. For every 500ml of liquid, add 500g **demerara sugar**, and boil until the sugar has dissolved completely. Pour into sterile bottles, label and store in a cool place.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful daily to maintain good eyesight and vascular health. For more acute problems, take 1 teaspoonful three times daily.

BILBERRY BERRY

Syrup or glycerite
- macular degeneration
- detached retina
- night vision
- cataracts
- capillary fragility

Bilberry glycerite

Fill a jar with **bilberries** and pour on **vegetable glycerine** to take up all the air spaces. Put the lid on and shake to get rid of any remaining bubbles, then top up again with glycerine. Keep the jar in a warm place, such as a sunny window ledge, by a range cooker or in an airing cupboard, for two or three weeks, then squeeze out the liquid using a jelly bag. Bottle, label and store in a cool place.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful daily to maintain good eyesight and vascular health. For more acute problems, take 1 teaspoonful three times daily.

Berry brandy pot

Start out with **bilberries**, placing them in the bottom of a jar or crock and then pouring on enough **brandy** (**or whisky**) to cover. You can, of course fill the whole jar with bilberries, or you can leave room and repeat the process with **other berries** in layers as they come into season – raspberries, blackberries, elderberries and lycium berries. Leave until winter and enjoy as a rather alcoholic treat, which will be packed with antioxidants and do your eyes and your veins a world of good. The liquid can be poured off and added to your syrup or glycerite, or left and enjoyed with the berries as a dessert with cream or however you like them.

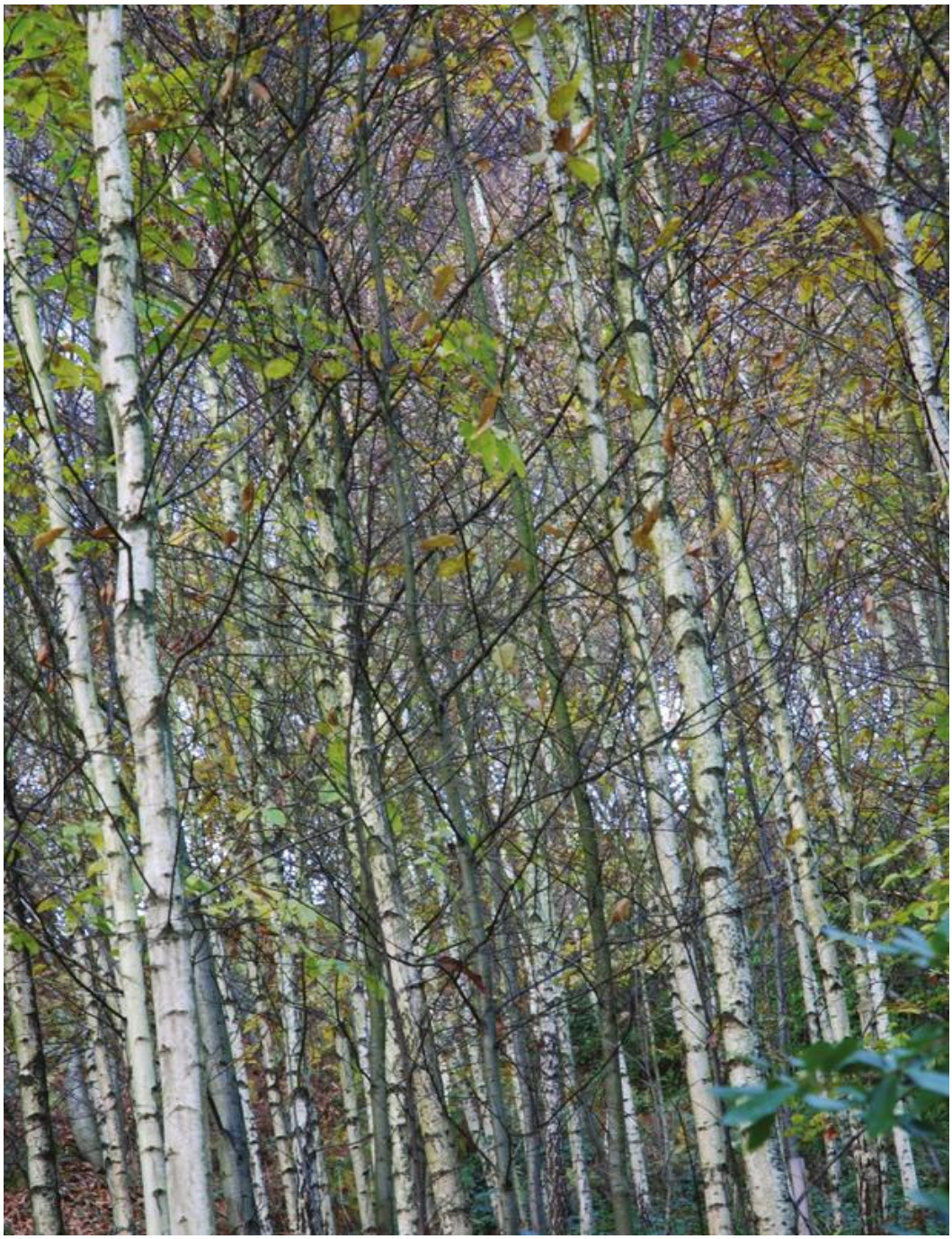
Bilberry leaf tea

Use a heaped teaspoonful of the **dried leaves** per cup or mug of **boiling water** and leave to infuse for 5 to 10 minutes.

Dose: Drink a cupful every few hours for an acute urinary infection, or one cup daily to help maintain blood sugar levels.

BILBERRY LEAF

Bilberry leaf tea
- urinary tract infections
- high blood sugar



A stand of silver birch in the Surrey hills, where the birch is so common it earned the name ‘Surrey weed’

Birch

Betula pendula, B. pubescens

Birch has a multitude of historical uses but is less familiar for its undoubted medicinal benefits. The sap makes a clear and refreshing drink that can be preserved as a wine, beer or spirit. The leaves produce a pleasant tea and an infused oil. In each form, birch is an excellent tonic and detoxifier, mainly working on the urinary system to remove waste products, as in kidney or bladder stone, gravel, gout and rheumatism. It reduces fluid retention and swellings, and clears up many skin problems.

Betulaceae Birch family

Description: Deciduous trees that often hybridise. Silver birch (*Betula pendula*) has white papery bark with black markings, and bosses at the base of the trunk. Downy birch (*B. pubescens*) has greyer bark and no bosses on the trunk.

Habitat: Woods, heaths, moors and gardens. Downy birch prefers wetter places.

Distribution: Both species are common and widespread throughout the British Isles. They are native to northern temperate regions of Eurasia.

Related species: One other species is a British native, the dwarf birch (*B. nana*), found in the Scottish Highlands. Worldwide, several species have medicinal value. In Ayurveda, Himalayan silver birch (*B. utilis*) is used.

Parts used: Sap, tapped in early spring; leaves, gathered in spring and early summer. The bark is also used.

Birch is one of the most useful of trees as well as one of the most graceful. From adhesives to wine, baskets to yokes and boats to vinegar, it has been a boon to people in the cold north for thousands of years. Its medicinal qualities have been historically valued and should be better known today.

Called the oldest tree in Britain, birch was a pioneer species when the ice caps retreated, moving in on the devastated land, growing quickly and then rotting to leave more fertile earth in which other species could take over. In its rapid life cycle birch pushes upwards too fast to develop a strong heart wood, but this makes it perfect for making buckets and canoes.

As a youngster (writes Matthew), I was a suburban Hiawatha, and wanted to be a 'Red Indian'. I had read in my weekly comic, the *Eagle*, how my heroes had made birch bark canoes and wrote on bark paper. Birch was a common enough tree, but I never really got down to the boat or the paper. Football was more important.

But now these memories return, as Julie and I tap a birch in our garden. It is that time in spring after most of the frosts and before the birch buds and leaves emerge. The tree is now forcing its sap upwards in prodigious quantity, and you simply tap into the flow, remembering to be kind to the tree after you have taken your share by closing off the wound.

Birch sap is rich in fructose whereas maple has sucrose. Sucrose is sweeter to the taste and the maple yields more per tree, so maple syrup is by far the bigger commercial industry. On the other hand, birch sap is cool, refreshing and clear. It tastes even better when reduced by simmering down into a golden-brown ambrosia. It's the sort of drink the elves would envy!

… birch water is the hope, the blessing and the panacea of rich and poor, master and peasant alike … almost unfailingly cures skin conditions … and countless chronic ills

against which medical science is so prone to fail.
– Baron Percy (*c.* 1800)

Use birch for…

Birch sap, birch water or blood, had a folk reputation for breaking kidney or bladder stone and treating skin conditions and rheumatic diseases. It can be drunk in spring as a refreshing and cleansing tonic, clearing the sluggishness of winter from the system. The fermented sap also makes birch wine and country beers and spirits.

Besides being a source of tinder and paper, birch bark has been used for tanning leather, especially in Russia, and for preserving nets and ropes. Another product of this gracious tree is an oil tar from the bark. This is used commercially in birch creams and ointments for chronic skin conditions.

The fresh leaves or buds of birch offer a powerful but pleasant tea for general detoxing, urinary complaints, cystitis, rheumatic and arthritic troubles and gout. Some herbalists add a pinch of sodium bicarbonate to improve the tea's ability to cut high uric acid levels. Any condition of fluid retention, such as cardiac or renal oedema and dropsy, will be helped by the tea. Birch is rich in potassium, so that (like dandelion) it does not deplete the body of this mineral in the way that medical diuretics do.

Being such a good eliminator, birch tea is also effective as a compress applied directly to the skin for herpes, eczema and the like.

You can easily make your own birch leaf oil by infusing the leaves in olive or sweet almond oil. This goes into commercial cellulite treatments, and can be used as a massage oil to relieve muscle aches and pains, fibromyalgia and rheumatism. Drink birch tea as well for maximum benefit.

Birch is regarded as safe medicinally and no side effects have been reported.

Birch leaf oil

Pick the **leaves** in late spring or early summer, while they are still fresh and light green. Put them in a jar large enough to hold them and pour in enough **extra virgin olive oil or sweet almond oil** to cover them. Put a piece of cloth over the jar as a lid, held on with a rubber band. This will allow any moisture released by the leaves to escape. Put the jar in a sunny place indoors and leave for a month but stir it fairly regularly, checking to see that the leaves are kept beneath the surface of the oil.

Strain off into a jug, using a nylon jelly bag or a large strainer (if you use muslin, it will soak up too much of the oil). Allow to settle – if there is any water in the oil from the leaves, it will sink to the bottom of the jug. Pour the oil into sterile storage bottles, leaving any watery residue behind in the jug, and label. Using amber, blue or green glass will protect the oil from ultraviolet light, so if you use clear glass bottles remember to store your oil away from light.

This can be used as a massage oil for cellulite, fibromyalgia, rheumatism and other muscle aches and pains. It can be also used on eczema and psoriasis – but remember that these also need to be treated internally, so ask your herbalist for advice.

Birch leaf oil
- cellulite
- detoxing massage
- aching muscles
- rheumatism
- eczema
- psoriasis

Birch leaf tea

Pick the leaves in spring and early summer while they are still a fresh bright green. They can be used fresh in season or dried for later use. To dry, spread the leaves on a sheet of paper or on a drying screen, which can be made by stretching and stapling a piece of netting to a wooden frame. Dry them in the shade, until crisp when crumbled.

To make the tea, use 4 or 5 **leaves** per cup or mug of **boiling water**, and allow to infuse for 5 to 10 minutes.

Dose: Drink a cupful up to three or four times daily.

Birch leaf tea
- spring cleanse
- kidney stones
- urinary gravel
- cystitis
- gout
- arthritis

• rheumatism
• psoriasis
• eczema
• fluid retention
• fevers

Birch sap

To collect the sap, drill a hole through the bark in the early spring, before the tree gets its leaves. Insert a tube into the hole – a straw with a flexible end works well – and put the other end in a bottle or collection bucket. After you have collected for about a week, make sure you plug the hole with a twig the right size so that the tree doesn't keep 'bleeding'.

The sap is a delightfully refreshing drunk as it comes from the tree, or it can be gently simmered down to taste to produce an amber ambrosia or further reduced to make a syrup.

Birch sap
• cleansing tonic

Our own crude birch tap: you can probably do better!

Blackberry, Bramble

Rubus fruticosus

Blackberry or bramble is one of the most familiar and also most aggressive of hedgerow plants. The protective spines demand respect, but the berries and leaves offer medicinal rewards that repay the inevitable scratches of picking.

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: A thorny, sprawling bush with white or pink flowers and black berries.

Habitat: Widespread in hedgerows, woods and on waste ground.

Distribution: Widespread. Native to temperate Europe but naturalised in North America and Australasia.

Related species: Blackberry is actually an aggregate of many taxonomically difficult species. It is related to dewberry (*R. caesius*), which has fruits with fewer, large segments and a blue bloom, and raspberry (*R. idaeus*).

Parts used: Leaves, gathered in early summer, berries harvested when ripe.

The poet Walt Whitman wrote this about blackberry in ‘Song of Myself’ (1855):

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars/ … and the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven.

In more sober judgement, Jonathan Roberts's history of fruit and vegetables (2001) calls blackberry a 'primitive thug'. Sorry to say, Roberts is probably closer to the truth. Blackberry always has been an aggressive settler on waste or cleared land, using an array of effective spreading mechanisms.

It is promiscuous in hybridising with similar thorny trailing plants of the rose family (over 2,000 blackberry 'species' have been described in Europe); then, it has tasty berries to spread its seeds, which pass unharmed through birds and humans alike; its young shoots bend to the ground and start fresh roots; its thorns hook on to adjacent foliage and help spread the plant laterally; and its dense ground cover shuts off most competing plants.

The old ironic name of 'lawyers' for blackberries has been exported from England to the United States: in either case, once in their clutches you will never escape! (Perhaps the makers of the handheld wireless device of the same name hoped for the same sense of being captured by their product.)

Highlanders in Scotland had a high opinion of blackberry. Its Gaelic name was *an druise bennaichte*, meaning 'blessed bramble'. This referred to Jesus supposedly using a bramble switch when riding his donkey to Jerusalem to evict the moneylenders from the temple. Highlanders made wreaths of ivy, bramble and rowan as protection against evil.

Blackberry has been spread from the temperate north around the world apart from the tropics. New Zealand has become overrun to such an extent that there is a saying: there are only two brambles in New Zealand, one covering North Island and one South Island. In Australia it is a notifiable pest that must be destroyed wherever found; over 9 million hectares of land have been infested.

Blackberries are the most commonly used natural fruit in Great Britain…. The fruit, so beloved of wine and jam makers, has rich medicinal properties, full of vitamin C and minerals, as are the leaves.
– Furnell (1985)

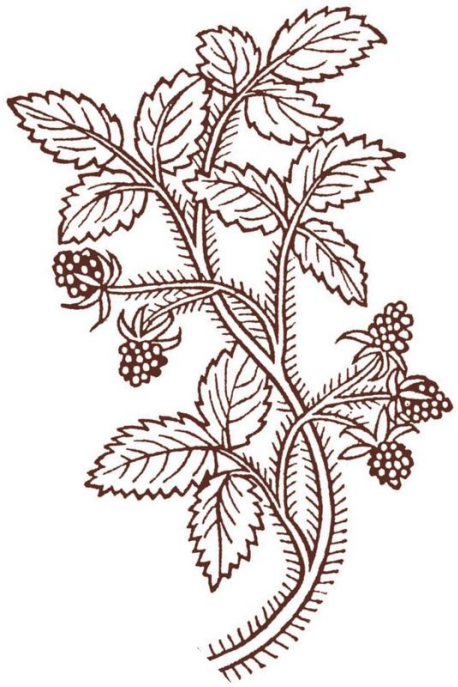
Blackberry hedges were used as defensive barriers around Native American settlements and in bygone Europe. Hedgerows containing blackberries make fields stock-proof, which is another reason why they are so widespread.

Sleeping Beauty, in the legend, was protected for a hundred years by a thicket of blackberry or perhaps wild rose – either would have been impenetrable after even two years by any but a true lover!

Going blackberrying or brambling is an ancient social activity worldwide, and family expeditions to gather the delicious fruit are well within living memory, though happening less in Britain these days. In the

Ozark mountains of the US, where communal picking persists, the blackberry harvest is called ‘black gold’.

Perhaps because blackberry was and still is so successful in the wild it was only in the nineteenth century that it was grown as a commercial crop, in the United States. It was also in the States that Judge Logan developed a cross raspberry/blackberry, named the loganberry in his honour. The friendlier raspberry meanwhile had been domesticated in Britain by the sixteenth century.



A medieval illustration of blackberry

This is the most generous of plants, and it is in the wild that most of us would have it stay … Blackberry picking must be the most widespread remnant of collective gathering in post-agricultural, industrialised communities.
– Barker (2001)

Bramble flowers can be pink or white, and often occur alongside ripe fruits

We recommend you revive or continue the wild-picking habit because blackberries are so good for you and can be found almost everywhere. The ripe black fruit, as everyone knows, makes wonderful jams, jellies, preserves, pies and cordials. The wine even stars in its own novel (*Blackberry Wine*, by Joanne Harris). But folklore dictates that you should not gather the berries after Michaelmas, because that is when the Devil spits or urinates on them. Or, we'd now say, the frost has got to them.

Use blackberry for…

In spring, blackberry shoots and the young leaves are a traditional European tonic, packed with vitamins and minerals, and used fresh as a tea. They can also be combined with raspberry leaves, young hawthorn leaves and birch shoots or leaves.

The leaves and unripe fruit are good medicine too, for their astringency. In some places the leaves were chewed to allay headaches. Crushed blackberry leaves are exactly what you need as a styptic to treat small wounds or cuts incurred when picking the fruit; they also work for boils and swellings.

The main use of the leaf tea is as a folk remedy for diarrhoea; the unripe red or green fruit can be used for the same purpose.

In the US Civil War of 1861–65 the ferocious hand-to-hand fighting in the woods was sometimes interrupted for ‘blackberry truces’. Both sides would take time out to pick blackberry leaves for a tea to treat diarrhoea and dysentery, which were rife in both armies.

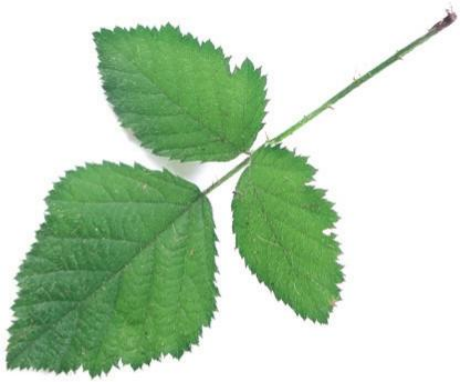
The leaf tea is like a green tea, pleasant but with a tannin feel. It is also a welcome relief for problems of the mouth, such as ulcers and gum disease. It was once thought to strengthen teeth, and is an old remedy for soothing sore throats and treating colds and anaemia. When cool, the tea makes a good skin lotion.

Bramble leaf tea

Bramble leaves should be picked in spring and summer while they are fresh and green. They can be used fresh for tea in season, or can be dried for the winter. Dry them in a shady place or indoors, until the leaves are brittle and crumble easily. Store in brown paper bags or in jars in a cool, dark place.

To make the tea, put a few **fresh leaves** or a rounded teaspoonful of crumbled **dry leaves** in a teapot. Pour on a mugful of **boiling water**, and allow to infuse for about 5 minutes, then strain and drink.

Dose: Can be drunk freely. Make double-strength to treat diarrhoea, drinking a cupful every hour as needed.



Bramble leaf tea
- general health
- diarrhoea
- mouth ulcers
- gingivitis
- sore throats
- colds
- ‘flu and fevers

Blackberry spread

This is a traditional recipe, often called ‘blackberry butter’, which is delicious with scones or on toast.

Put in a pan: **500g blackberries**
500g tart apples, chopped up but not peeled or cored
grated zest and juice of a lemon

Simmer gently for about 15 minutes, until soft and mushy. Rub the pulp through a sieve to remove the skins and pips. Weigh the pulp, and for every 400g of pulp add 300g of **sugar**.

Heat gently until the sugar has dissolved, then simmer and stir until the mixture is thick and smooth – this usually takes about 20 minutes. Pour into sterilised jars, seal and label.

Blackberry oxymel

Pick blackberries when they are ripe, checking that the heel, the place where they come off the stem, is white or pale green – if this has gone purple or dark, it's not a good one to use.

Put the **blackberries** in a china or glass bowl and pour on enough **white wine vinegar** just to cover them. Put a plate or a cloth over the bowl and leave it for a day or two, then crush the fruit with a potato masher. Strain the juice through a sieve or jelly bag into a measuring jug, then pour into a saucepan. Add half the volume of **honey**, then heat to melt the honey. Bring to the boil and boil for 5 minutes, bottle and label. This syrup can also be frozen in an ice cube tray, and then stored in bags in the freezer.

To use: Mix one tablespoonful with a cup of hot water as a bedtime drink, or drink frequently to help relieve a cold.

Blackberry oxymel
- general health
- colds
- sore throats

Burdock

Arctium spp.

Traditionally combined with dandelion both as a soft drink and a medicine, burdock is a powerful cleanser and blood purifier. It is one of the foremost detoxing herbs, and is particularly effective for skin problems. The root is a food as well as a medicine, and is popular in Japanese cooking.

Asteraceae (Compositae) Daisy family

Description: A biennial plant with large, soft, light green leaves and thistle-like red-purple flowers that form burrs with hooked spines. Can reach a sculptural 2 metres in its second year.

Habitat: Hedgerows, wood edges and waste ground.

Distribution: Native to Europe and Asia, but found in temperate regions around the world; taken to North America by European settlers.

Species used: Greater or common burdock (*Arctium lappa*) is the best-known species, but lesser burdock (*A. minus*) is more widespread in Britain. It is similar in appearance and used interchangeably for medicinal purposes.

Parts used: Leaves picked in summer, roots dug in spring or autumn, and seeds gathered in autumn.

Burdock is a sturdy biennial, with a rosette of large leaves forming in the first year, as the tap root deepens. In the second year the stems shoot up, producing the thistle-like flowers or burrs that gave it the old name of beggar’s buttons.

The roots are best used in the first autumn or second spring, and are more tonic in the spring. Descending nearly a metre, the mature root takes energetic digging up, but younger roots are just as good.

Burdock can be grown in the garden (one has adopted us, and we are happy to host it), and if you use raised beds or drainage pipes the root is much less effort to harvest. The other advantage is that you will know where to dig for spring roots, as the leaves die back to very little in the winter and the plants can be difficult to find.

Burdock root was a food for our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and is appreciated as a cooked vegetable in Japan, *gobo*; the dish is now popular in Hawaii and New Zealand. Its delicious mild flavour is similar to artichoke or scorzonera.

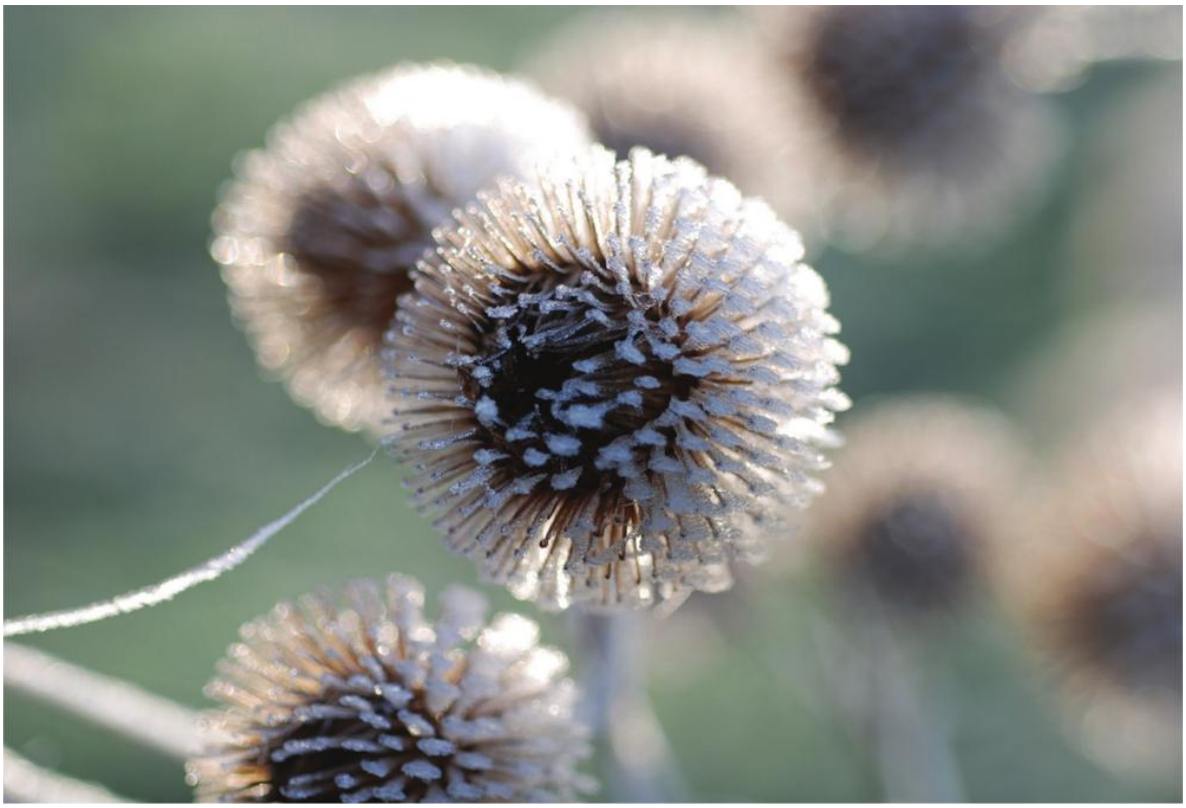
Burdock is often called the velcro plant. This all comes from walking the dog: Swiss inventor George de Mestral noticed that after he and his dog had brushed by a large burdock, the plant's 'hooks' had tagged onto 'loops' in his wool trousers and in the dog's fur.

Using the technique of 'biomimicry', De Mestral made two nylon pads, one of hooks and one of loops; the more you pushed them, the more they fused, but they pulled apart easily, just like the plant's fruits do in nature.

As space institute NASA later used his Velcro™-derived products for astronaut suits, burdock (by proxy) became the first space weed. It's the latest version of a story played out over the centuries, with immigrants' clothes and their livestock fur transferring the benefits and burdens of burdock across the seas to new lands.

In terms of the famous soft drink, a few specialist makers still use real roots in their dandelion and burdock mix but the mass market version has artificial flavourings.

Burdock is a ‘deep food’ and alterative that moves the body to a state of well-nourished health, promotes the healing of wounds, and removes the indicators of system imbalance such as low energy, ulcers, skin conditions, and dandruff.
– Green (2000)



Use burdock for…

Burdock is a significant detoxing herb in both Western and Chinese medicinal traditions. Known as a blood purifier, its special attribute is to stimulate the release of waste products from the cells. This is a powerful process at cellular level, and the metabolic wastes then need to be removed from the body.

Here is where the dandelion comes in, making a wonderful complement to burdock with its diuretic and flushing qualities to the outside world via the kidneys and liver. Hence the classic mix of the two roots. Burdock also combines well with red clover or dock.

Burdock leaves emerging in early spring of the second year.

Herbal blood purifiers have the associated virtue of cleansing the skin. Burdock is known for its remarkable effect on skin conditions arising from imbalance, as in dry or scaly skin, and eruptions, as in acne, boils, eczema and psoriasis.

For all these it can be applied externally as a poultice or taken internally as a decoction or tincture (the last in small quantities as it's strong). Such dermatological uses are 'official' in Britain.

In the past burdock was associated with medical conditions that seemed incurable, if not evil, at the time. Mixed with wine in the Middle Ages, it was given for leprosy; later it was used to treat syphilis (Henry VIII improved, but was not cured by it), epilepsy and hysteria; in modern times research has suggested possible benefits in treating HIV and cancer. Hildegard of Bingen was already using burdock root on her cancer patients in the 1100s. In each case burdock strongly supported the immune system.

Burdock root is used to break down excess uric acid in the joints that leads to gout. It also relieves arthritis and swollen prostate. Ask your herbalist's advice on the best combination of herbs for your own condition and constitution.

Another burdock benefit lies in its bitterness, which helps stimulate the digestive fluids and promote appetite and digestion. This underlies the tang of the famous drink and makes burdock palatable in anorexia.

Burdock leaf poultice

A simple poultice can be made from a whole burdock leaf. Steam it to soften the leaf, and apply as hot as can be borne to the affected place.

Leave it there until it cools down and then heat again, or put a hot water bottle over it to keep it warm, and leave on for half an hour. The poultice will draw blood to the area, and as it is also antiseptic it will fight infection and accelerate healing.

The leaves can also be crushed with a rolling pin and applied as a poultice for minor burns; leave them in place until the pain subsides.

Burdock leaf poultice

- bruises
- boils
- acne
- rheumatism
- arthritis
- gout

Burdock and dandelion root decoction

Simmer about 25g each of fresh chopped **burdock and dandelion root** in 750ml of **water** for 20 minutes. Strain and divide into three or four doses to drink during the day, hot or cold. If you want to sweeten the decoction, add a tablespoonful of dried liquorice root before boiling.

Burdock and dandelion root decoction

- acne
- eczema
- boils
- psoriasis
- detoxing

Burdock and dandelion toffee

Dig several roots of **burdock and dandelion**, preferably in spring. In each case strip the root bark off, and clean and chop up the inner part. Weigh out 100g of each. Load into a saucepan and cover with **500ml water**. Bring to the boil and simmer for 20 minutes. Allow to cool.

Simmer again until the roots are tasteless (ie have surrendered their content to the liquid). This reduces the mixture to about 200ml. Strain and add **1 tablespoon butter and 12 tablespoons of sugar**. Boil for 5 minutes then simmer for 20 minutes more. It will become toffee-like.

Test the toffee by pouring a drip of it onto a cold plate, as you would in testing jam: when it crinkles into soft threads, it is ready. Pour it into a buttered shallow tin. Before it sets totally, mark out squares and save the toffee slab in greaseproof paper; alternatively, stretch it out by hand into taffee: this is pale and pliable, ideal for balls, plaits etc.

Cherry

Prunus avium

Wild sweet cherries, also known as gaskins, geans, mazzards and merrys, are not only delicious to eat but also good for your gout or arthritis. The fruit stalks and inner bark have medicinal virtues too, for treating dry coughs, sore throats and bronchitis. It is a bonus that children seem to love the tea or syrup, leaving their parents to drink up the cherry brandy.

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: A tall tree with smooth, shiny and red–brown bark, peeling horizontally; bears soft white flowers in spring; small red or yellow cherries follow in the autumn.

Habitat: Woodlands and hedgerows.

Distribution: Wild cherries are widespread throughout the British Isles.

Related species: The dwarf cherry (*P. cerasus*) yields sour Morello cherries. Bark of the North American wild cherry (*P. serotina*) is widely used in herbal medicine for coughs.

Parts used: Fruit and fruit stalks gathered in summer, bark harvested in autumn.

We all know and enjoy the cherry blossom and cherry fruit seasons, but using the bark of the wild sweet cherry (*Prunus avium*) medicinally may be a new idea to some readers. The official *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia* lists the powdered bark of the American cherry (*P. serotina*) as an anti-tussive, i.e. anti-cough, remedy, but we have found the wild local equivalent to be excellent in its own right and recommend it to you.

Long used as a country recipe, a decoction or syrup of the inner bark of wild cherry, alone or with elderberry (as in our recipe), plums or sloes, remains a tasty and safe drink for sore throats and bronchitis that children find palatable. Its special affinity is for dry and irritating coughs. The stalks of the fruit also have a traditional use as a decoction for coughs, with similar effects to the bark. The fruit can be added for flavour.

The fruit has a reputation as a gout treatment, but you need to eat quite a lot of cherries to lower the high levels of uric acid implicated. Cherries work well as a gentle laxative, but anyone who has gorged on fresh cherries will have discovered that eating too many can cause diarrhoea.

Cherries contain anthocyanins, which are potent antioxidants, as well as vitamins A, B and C. They are cleansing and nourishing, and help to ‘build the blood’ in cases of weakness and anaemia. Cherries help with colds and recovery from illness, and taste so good you hardly need an excuse to eat them.

The cherry tree is the only fruit tree I know where people hold the bark in as high esteem as the fruit.
– Brill & Dean (1994)

A tree of virtuous blossom, virtuous timber, and rather less virtuous fruit, except for the purposes of cherry brandy.
– Grigson (1958)

Fresh cherry fruit
• anaemia
• constipation
• gout
• arthritis

Cherry brandy

Loosely fill a preserving jar with **cherries**. If they are sour, sprinkle with a little **muscovado sugar**, then top up the jar with **brandy**. Latch the lid down tightly and shake the jar well. Turn it upside down every few days to keep the sugar from settling at the bottom. After three months, strain and bottle. Enjoy at your leisure.

Cherry bark and elderberry cough syrup

Cut thin strips of **bark** from cherry branches in the autumn when the leaves are falling. One way to do this is to prune off a few small

branches, then use a sharp knife to cut off all the bark. It is the greenish-white inner bark that is medicinal. Dry the bark in the shade.

Fill a small jar with the **dried bark** and top it up with **vodka**. Leave in a cool dark place for a month, shaking the jar occasionally, then strain. This is a cherry bark tincture.

To make the cough syrup, combine 1 part **cherry bark tincture** with 2 parts **elderberry glycerite** (recipe, page 63). For example, for a 150ml bottle of syrup you would use 50ml cherry bark tincture and 100ml elderberry glycerite.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful three or four times a day. Halve this for children.

Cherry bark and elderberry syrup
- coughs
- sore throats
- bronchitis

Chickweed

Stellaria media

This is the best-known herbal remedy for itchy skin and hot skin inflammations of various types. Chickweed is a soothing, nutritious and cooling herb, with a reputation for clearing stubborn, long-lasting bodily conditions.

It has special affinities for the eyes, lungs and chest, and can be eaten as a food. As you'll see, it is far more than chickenfeed!

Caryophyllaceae Pink family

Description: A floppy, sprawling annual plant with soft green leaves and tiny star-like white flowers.

Habitat: Gardens, hedgebanks and waste-ground.

Distribution: Very common throughout the British Isles. Native to Europe and Asia but now found as a weed worldwide.

Related species: There are three other less common species of chickweed found in the British Isles: greater chickweed (*S. neglecta*), lesser chickweed (*S. pallida*) and water chickweed (*Myosoton aquaticum*). Mouse-ears look similar, but are hairy and more upright.

Parts used: Above-ground parts, gathered whenever vibrant and green.

Chickweed has some less familar old names, like chick wittles, clucken wort and chickeny weed, which confirm it is as a fowl favourite. This can be attested worldwide: for example, Julie's grandmother in Australia had chickens that loved their chickweed. Matthew's mother in Cambridgeshire can vouch for the relish with which her caged canaries used to nibble fresh chickweed flowers and seeds. Not surprisingly, it is also called bird seed.

But why should birds have all the fun? Chickweed is an excellent salad plant for humans, especially in late winter and early spring, when there's little else green and fresh available for foraging.

It tastes as though it is full of chlorophyll, has an earthy, slightly salty tang and is easily gathered. Its high vitamin A and C levels, saponins and plentiful minerals, including iron, copper, magnesium and calcium, make it one of the best spring tonics.

Chickweed has long been eaten fresh this way by country people and it was once sold in the streets of London. Chickweed is tender and juicy, and has been called the tenderest of wild greens.

We often harvest it fresh for salad. Chickweed on its own is perhaps an acquired taste, but it is bland and goes well in a mixed salad. The tastiest way we have found to eat it is to make it into a pesto with pine nuts, which is surprisingly good (see recipe).

Chickweed is available almost all year round, except in midsummer when it becomes fibrous and in midwinter when it disappears. It is one of the most genteel of weeds, easily pulled up and never rambunctious. Its presence signals fertile soil and it helps keep the soil moist. And once you find how good it is, you'll never seem to have enough of it!

One help in identifying chickweed among its *Stellaria* cousins is its very commonness, in the British Isles and around the world. Chickweed is a very floppy plant and has smooth light green leaves, with one line of hairs up the side of the stem. In any event, other members of its clan have

similar herbal attributes, such as lots of vitamins A and C and steroidal saponins, and can be used safely, if less effectively.

In late winter, it's a blessing for victims of F.W.S. (Forager's Withdrawal Syndrome) who crave a wild salad.
– Brill & Dean (1994)

Think of chickweed as being as soft as slippery elm, as soothing as marshmallow, and as protective and strengthening as comfrey root.
– Weed (1989)

Use chickweed for…

Chickweed makes a good broth or tea for children and convalescents and can be taken in quantity. One American herbalist writes with gusto of taking 'quarts of chickweed a day'.

Herbally, the best-known external use for chickweed is to soothe itches, bites, stings, inflammations, burns, swellings, sunburn, bruises, splinters and sore eyes. It makes a good and readily found first-aid or emergency remedy – pull up a handful and place directly onto the affected part. If you have a little more time, crush some chickweed with a mortar and

pestle and bandage the paste against the wound or bite as a poultice. This is very cooling and soothing for sunburn.

Chickweed has the particular reputation of resolving skin problems where some form of heat is involved and where other herbs or creams have failed, especially when a cooling, drawing action is needed.

It is also known for clearing up long-standing or ‘indolent’ damage, such as eczema, rheumatic joints and varicose veins.

This small herb, often classed as a troublesome weed, is one of the supreme healers of the herbal kingdom, and has given me wonderful results.
– Levy (1966)

[The *Stellaria* species are an] *… interesting group of plants that have rather fallen into disuse. The notable exception is chickweed without which a herbal dispensary is incomplete.*
– Barker (2001)

It is also safe for delicate organs that need cooling and soothing. One special affinity it has is for eye inflammations of most sorts, including

itchiness from a contact lens. Dioscorides, the Greek scientist, described a chickweed recipe nearly two thousand years ago: he added crushed chickweed to corn meal to produce a paste that was poulticed onto the affected eye.

We mentioned before that chickweed contains saponins. Saponin means ‘soap-like’. If you take a handful of the plant and rub it in your hands with a little water, you may not actually get a lather, but you’ll feel the soapiness and it’ll leave your hands feeling lovely and soft, if smelling a little of chickweed.

Saponins work at a cellular level to increase absorption and permeability. What this means is that inflamed organ membranes, as in the liver, kidneys and lungs, are helped by saponins to absorb healing nutrients, as well as allowing their wastes and blockages to be more easily removed. Add to this the cooling qualities of chickweed, and you have a wonderful, subtle herbal cleanser and restorer at work, far beyond the familiar and dismissive uses for ‘itchiness’.

Chickweed works well internally on hot inflammatory problems like gastritis, colitis, congested chest, blocked kidneys and gallbladder, and piles. It has an affinity for the lungs, for sore throats, bronchitis, asthma, irritable dry cough and other respiratory conditions.

Another quality you may come across is chickweed’s reputed value as a slimming aid. Chickweed water or tea is an old wives’ remedy for the overweight, and dried chickweed is indeed added to some proprietary slimming preparations.

What do herbalists say? Some believe it does work, as the saponins help to dissolve body fat; others note it stimulates urination, so will assist in shedding body moisture, which would contribute to weight loss. As with many treatments, what works for one person may not be effective for everyone.

Chickweed has a valuable toning action for the body’s internal organs. In American herbalist Susun Weed’s words, it ‘sponges up the spills’ and

‘tidies up the rips’. She refers to its ‘deep mending skills’, and to its ability to relieve, clear, protect and nourish.

Chickweed can also be made into a flower essence, which is used to help release the past and focus in the present moment. If you want to make a chickweed essence, follow the instructions given for selfheal essence on page 154.

Whether as a salad, tea or tincture, essence or vinegar, chickweed is effective, available, free and safe.

Chickweed pesto

Pick a few handfuls of **chickweed**, removing any brown bits and roots. Break off the larger stems, as they have a very strong stretchy fibre at their core and are surprisingly stringy for such a floppy plant. Put the rest in a blender with a handful of **pine nuts**, a couple of cloves of **garlic** and enough **olive oil** to make it blendable. Blend until it is as smooth as you like it, then serve fresh on pasta with some **grated pecorino or parmesan cheese**. It can also be eaten with rice or other grains, or used as a sauce for vegetables.

Chickweed bath

For itchy skin, especially if this is over a large area of your body, try adding chickweed to a bath. Put a few handfuls of **fresh chickweed** in a sock or tie in a square of muslin, and use a piece of string to hang this under the hot tap so that the water flows through it as you run your bath. Oatmeal can also be mixed with the chickweed for additional soothing. Once the bath is run, gently squeeze the sock or bag to release more of the contents.

Alternatively, make a strong infusion of chickweed, strain and add to the bath water.

Chickweed bath
- itchy skin
- shingles
- rheumatism
- rashes

Chickweed bath vinegar

Pick **chickweed** and put it in a blender, adding enough **cider vinegar** to blend. Strain and bottle. Your vinegar will start out a light lime green and change after a day or two to a lovely golden colour. Add a couple of tablespoons to bath water. This recipe combines chickweed's effectiveness at relieving itchy skin with vinegar's acidity, which helps restore the natural protective acid balance of the skin. It is particularly good if you live in a hard-water area.

Chickweed vinegar can also be used in salad dressings.

Chickweed bath vinegar

- itchy skin
- shingles
- rheumatism
- rashes

Cleavers

Galium aparine

Also known as goose grass, clivers and sticky-willy, this common roadside plant clambers all over hedges and other plants in a green mass in high summer. It sends up bright green shoots from January onwards, being one of the first plants to sprout.

Cleavers is a wonderfully gentle lymphatic cleanser and a fantastic spring tonic, helping clean up our system after winter. It soothes irritated membranes of the urinary tract and promotes urine flow, and is useful for many mouth and throat problems.

Rubiaceae Bedstraw family

Description: A clambering annual covered in small hooks that help it ‘cleave’ to anything it touches. Can be several metres high. Leaves are in whorls; small white flowers are followed by pairs of small ball-like fruit.

Habitat: Hedgerows, farmland, stream banks and gardens.

Distribution: Common all over the British Isles. Native to Eurasia and North America; widespread but introduced in the southern hemisphere.

Related species: Two other species, corn cleavers (*G. tricornutum*) and false cleavers (*G. spurium*), are very similar but not widespread. The genus *Galium* also includes the bedstraws. Lady’s bedstraw (*G. verum*) and hedge bedstraw (*G. album*) can be used interchangeably with cleavers as medicinal herbs.

Parts used: Above-ground parts, gathered in handfuls from early spring until the plants flower in the summer.

Cleavers is the earliest of the traditional spring tonic herbs to sprout, appearing even before the end of the year in sheltered spots under hedges. By February it is making dense mats of intensely green whorled leaves. This is the time to harvest it to eat in salads, before it becomes tough and hairy. Pick the shoots and chop them finely. Nicholas Culpeper (1653) nicely summarises the traditional view:

It is a good remedy in the Spring, eaten (being first chopped small, and boiled well) in water-gruel, to cleanse the blood, and strengthen the liver, thereby to keep the body in health, and fitting it for that change of season that is coming.

By summer, cleavers romps all over the place, and its tiny white four-petalled flowers appear. At this stage, it will stick to anything, sometimes growing above head height. It can be used to make a quick makeshift collecting basket by twining it around on itself. As John Parkinson (1640) noted:

the herbe serveth well the Country people in stead of a strainer, to cleare their milke from strawes, haires, or any other thing that falleth into it.

To understand how cleavers works in the body, you need to know a little about the lymphatic system. When our arteries carry oxygenated blood out to the far reaches of the body, the blood vessels branch smaller and smaller until only one red blood cell at a time can pass through.

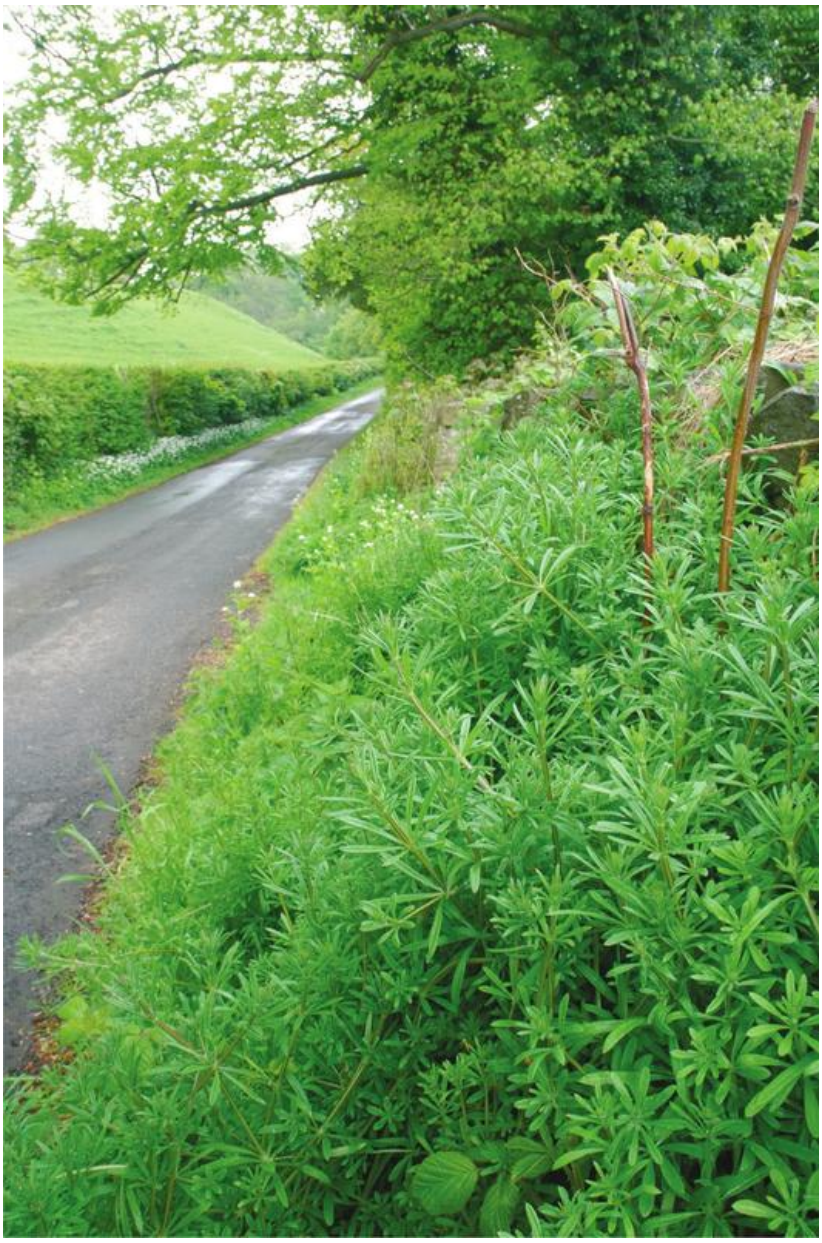
These tiny blood vessels are the capillaries. Here, the red blood cells give up their oxygen and nutrients to the clear liquid around them, which then crosses the capillary walls into the cells.

The cells take the oxygen and nutrients, and in return give up their metabolic waste products to the fluid. This fluid doesn't go back into the blood vessels, but is collected by the lymphatic vessels, which are like a white bloodstream flowing back through the body towards the heart in parallel with the veins.

White blood cells in the lymphatic fluid start cleaning it up, and it passes through lymph nodes where the process continues. When it is all clean, the fluid rejoins the bloodstream at the point where the large vein enters the heart. Here it is pumped out to the lungs and the cycle begins again. If the lymph is clean and flowing well, the body will be healthy.

Use cleavers for…

Herbally, cleavers promotes the lymphatic flow and helps rid the lymphatic system of metabolic waste. In effect, it is like a pipe cleaner for our lymph vessels. This quality makes it a useful remedy for swollen glands, tonsillitis, adenoid problems and earache. Because of its effect on the lymph, cleavers enjoys a reputation for helping to shrink tumours, both benign and cancerous, and for removing nodular growths on the skin.



A spring tonic in the raw: cleavers in foreground, ramsons flowering across the road on left. Near Barnard Castle, Co. Durham

It is wonderful how strong and healthy you will become [on taking cleavers juice mixed with spring water]
– The Physicians of Myddfai (13th century)

Clavers, Aparine: the tender Winders, with young *Nettle-Tops*, are us'd in *Lenten* Pottages.
– Evelyn (1699)

Austrian herbalist Maria Treben (1980) favoured cleavers tea as a drink and gargle to treat cancers of the tongue and throat. It is good too for other problems of the tongue, throat and neck, and is used by herbalists for goitre, other thyroid issues and swollen glands.

Because it promotes the flow of urine, and cools and soothes, cleavers is used to reduce heat and irritation of the urinary tract. It relieves the scalding pain on urination associated with cystitis, and is a remedy for chronic recurrent bouts of urethritis, for kidney inflammation, irritable bladder and prostatitis.

It is also effective in clearing grit, gravel or calcium deposits in the urinary tract. As a bonus, because cleavers is so good at cleaning the body internally, it also helps clear and nourish the skin.

Cleavers combines well with other familiar ‘weeds’ – curly dock, nettle, dandelion and burdock – as in our ‘garden weed tincture’ recipe. This tincture is an effective cleansing tonic for the whole body.

Cleavers loses some of its effectiveness when dried, and works best fresh. Picking your own in the spring and using it daily while in season is a great way to give yourself a gentle annual spring-cleanse. Try chopping a little young cleavers to mix in with salads or add to soups. The juice can be blended with fruit smoothies.

Cleavers in salads

• spring tonic

Cleavers poultice

The fresh, bruised plant is an excellent poultice for nettle rash, sores, blisters, burns or any hot inflammation of the skin. Just pick a handful of cleavers, crush it with a mortar and pestle, and apply to the skin.

Cleavers poultice

- sunburn
- burns
- psoriasis
- open sores
- blisters
- nettle rash

Cleavers juice

Taking the fresh juice is the best way to use cleavers from early spring until summer. If you don't have a juicer, don't worry – just chop up a handful of fresh cleavers, put it in a jelly bag and squeeze out the juice.
Dose: Take 1 teaspoonful two or three times a day.

Cleavers juice

- swollen glands
- fluid retention
- tonsillitis
- breast cysts
- bladder irritation
- burning urine

Cleavers succus

If you want to preserve your cleavers juice for use in the autumn and winter, the best way is to mix it with glycerine or honey to make a simple preparation called a succus. This is done as follows:

Measure your fresh **cleavers juice**, and add an equal amount of **vegetable glycerine** or **runny honey**. Mix well, then bottle and label. It tastes just like the smell of fresh-mown grass.

Dose: Take 1 to 2 teaspoonfuls two or three times a day.

Cleavers succus

- swollen glands
- fluid retention

• tonsillitis
• breast cysts
• bladder irritation
• burning urine

Cleavers ointment

Stir the **fresh juice** into **anhydrous lanolin** until it is soft and a pale green colour. Use a fork for this. It's hard work at first, but gets easier as the lanolin starts to absorb the juice. This is a particularly good application for dry, cracked or chapped skin.

Cleavers ointment
• dry chapped skin
• chapped lips
• burns

Garden weed tincture

Here's a great way to turn a morning's weeding into something really useful – a whole-body tonic to improve your health generally.
Weed out and wash:
Cleavers – best collected before they set seed
Dandelion plants – root, leaves and all
Nettle tops (before they flower) and **nettle root**
Curled dock roots
Burdock roots
Chop the herbs and put them in a large, wide-mouthed jar, packing them in fairly tightly. Pour on enough **vodka** to cover them, and leave for a month, shaking occasionally. Strain off. If you have a fruit press, use it to get the maximum liquid out of the roots; otherwise just use muscle power to squeeze it out using a jelly bag. Bottle and label.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful twice a day.

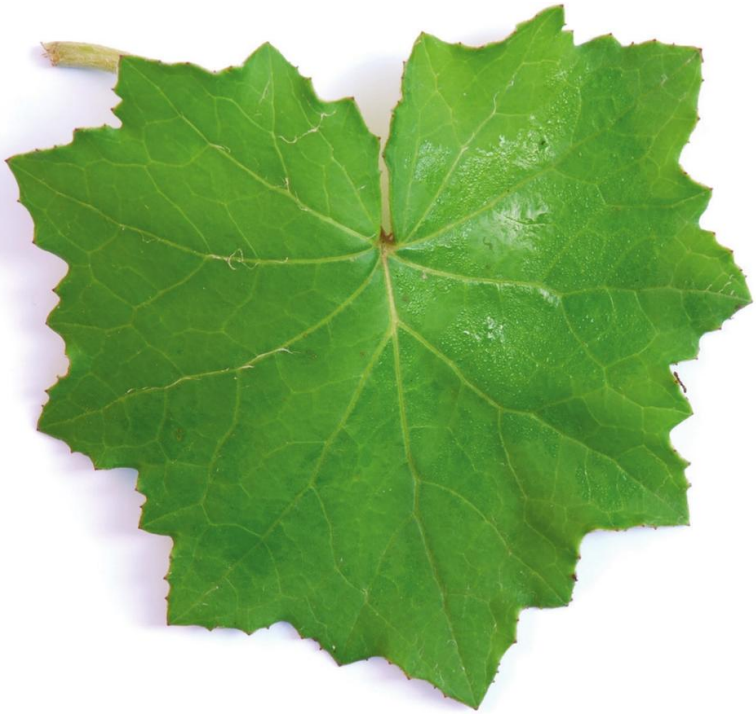
Garden weed tincture
• skin problems
• weak digestion
• anaemia
• low energy

Coltsfoot

Coltsfoot

Tussilago farfara

Coltsfoot is one of the earliest plants of the herbalist's year, and its leaves and flowers make an effective cough remedy.



Asteraceae (Compositae) Daisy family

Description: A perennial herb that flowers in late winter/early spring before the heart-shaped polygonal leaves appear.

Habitat: Stream banks, roadsides, cliffs, woodland and waste ground.

Distribution: Found throughout the British Isles, coltsfoot is native to Europe and northern Asia, and naturalised in North America.

Related species: In summer, the leaves of coltsfoot can be mistaken for butterbur (*Petasites hybridus*) and winter heliotrope (*P. fragrans*), which should not be used.

Parts used: Flowers harvested in early spring, leaves gathered in summer.

Coltsfoot is a common plant of roadsides, hedgerows and stream banks and is one of the first plants to flower in early spring. It produces flowers before leaves, a fact reflected in the old name ‘son before the father’. Coltsfoot is unmistakable when in flower, but its large, roughly heart-shaped leaves can be confused with the related butterbur in summer, so be sure you have the right plant.

It is the leaves that give coltsfoot its name. As well as colts or foals, they have also been named for the hooves of bulls, pigs and even asses. The flowers are succeeded by dandelion-like clocks made up of tiny white seed parachutes.

A bright sunny March morning saw us by the sea in north-eastern Norfolk, where the clay cliffs were maritime mini-meadows of sunny yellow. Here coltsfoot is a dominant plant, a coloniser and stabiliser of a crumbling, eroding coastline. An inspiring sight to eyes bereft of colour and sunlight through a long winter! The bees and hover flies were gorging on the sweet nectar, and seeing these swathes of sunshine you could finally believe spring was really back again.

Both flowers and leaves are used medicinally, and the Latin names tell us so. *Tussilago* is from the Latin *tussis* for cough, and *farfara* or flour refers to the whitish, cottony down on the underside of the leaves. Before commercial matches were available, this down was collected and dipped into a solution of saltpetre for use in tinder-boxes.

This is the cough remedy par excellence *and is safe and effective for children providing that it is taken only for temporary symptomatic use.*
– Barker (2001)

Use coltsfoot for …

Coltsfoot has long been used for all kinds of cough and upper respiratory tract complaints. The flowers and leaves yield a sweetish, aniseedish tea, taken together or separately, fresh or dried. Some herbalists advise straining the tea to remove the leaf hairs, which can be an irritant.

It was an interesting coincidence for us that at the time we photographed the coltsfoot meadows Julie was suffering a hacking cough, so we gathered some flowers to make tea, which was just what she needed. It is very soothing, calming a cough almost at once. It helps moisten a dry irritating cough and loosen phlegm.

Coltsfoot leaves have also been used as a smoking tobacco since classical Greek and Roman times (respectively, Dioscorides and Pliny write about it), and have earned the name ‘British tobacco’. You can use the dried

leaves to roll your own or smoke them in a pipe – proving that you can sometimes smoke to alleviate a cough!

Coltsfoot rock is an old-fashioned and pleasant-tasting commercially available confection. This is a good way to persuade children to take a cough remedy. And coltsfoot was usually the first wild flower available to make a light wine, appearing even before cowslip.

Coltsfoot has been found to contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids, as does comfrey. Not all these alkaloids are toxic, however, and coltsfoot's small amounts do not appear to be harmful at low doses. As cough remedies are not normally taken long-term anyway, there is little chance of coltsfoot causing any problems. To be safe, we suggest taking it for no more than six weeks in total in a year.

Coltsfoot combines well with mullein, especially for dry coughs, and is good as a tea with fennel.

Coltsfoot and fennel tea

While coltsfoot can be used on its own as a tea, it is tastier and even more soothing when combined with fennel. You can use it fresh or dried to make this tea. To dry coltsfoot, spread the flowers or leaves on a screen or a tray and put it in an airing cupboard until they are crisp. Store in brown paper bags, or in a jar in a cool dark cupboard.

Put **four or five coltsfoot flowers or a couple of leaves** in a teapot with a **heaped teaspoonful of fennel seed**. Pour boiling water over them and brew for 10 minutes, then strain and drink hot.

Dose: Drink a cupful three times a day. It is wonderfully soothing for coughs and bronchial inflammation.

Coltsfoot tea

- coughs
- bronchitis
- throat irritation
- mild asthma

Coltsfoot and honey poultice

Mix the **chopped leaves** with enough **honey** to make a paste, and apply to boils and sores that won't heal. Place a piece of gauze over the poultice, and bandage in place. Change for a fresh poultice every day until healed.

Coltsfoot poultice

- boils
- sores
- ulcers

Cautions

In view of its pyrrolizidine alkaloid content, coltsfoot should not be used for more than six weeks a year in total. Do not use if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or have liver disease. Do not give to young children.

Coltsfoot

Comfrey

Symphytum officinale

Comfrey's old name of knitbone refers to its strong healing action for broken bones. It will also knit flesh together, speeding the healing of wounds. Applied as a poultice or ointment, it can be used to treat bruises, dislocations and sprains. Despite much controversy, comfrey is safe if correct guidelines are followed.

Boraginaceae Borage family

Description: A lush, hairy, fast-growing plant with yellowish-cream or dull purple flowers, and a winged stem.

Habitat: Moist, marshy places.

Distribution: Common in the southern UK, but absent from parts of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Native through Europe to Siberia. Introduced to North America and other temperate regions.

Related species: There are a number of species found in the British Isles, both natives and garden escapes. They can all be used externally, but only *Symphytum officinale* should be taken internally. Russian comfrey (*S. x uplandicum*) is common on drier ground, and is a hybrid between common comfrey (*S. officinale*) and rough comfrey (*S. asperum*). Tuberous comfrey (*S. tuberosum*) is native, with pale yellowish-cream flowers. White comfrey (*S. orientale*) has pure white flowers, while creeping comfrey (*S. grandiflorum*) has reddish flowers, which fade to yellowish-cream. Because comfreys hybridise, it can be difficult to tell them apart.

Parts used: Leaves, root.

Comfrey has a long history of use for its healing and anti-inflammatory effects on bone fractures, arthritis, inflamed joints, cuts, wounds and other injuries.

This herb had such a reputation for repairing tissue that it became popular for less virtuous brides to bathe in comfrey before their wedding day to restore their virginity!

Comfrey's scientific and common names both refer to its healing qualities. *Symphytum* is from the Greek *symphyo*, make grow together, and *phyton*, plant; 'comfrey' is said to be from the Roman word *conferre*, join together.

In addition to medicinal benefits, comfrey is often grown as a fodder plant for animals, as a fertiliser and to add to compost. The most commonly grown comfrey for these purposes is Bocking 14, a sterile clone of Russian comfrey (*S. x uplandicum*).

Use comfrey for …

In the past, comfrey was widely used for healing ulceration in the digestive tract, as it is mucilaginous and soothing as well as healing. It was also used for bronchitis and other chest complaints, to soothe the irritation and promote expectoration of mucus.

Today, other herbs tend to be preferred for these conditions, owing to the possible dangers of the pyrrolizidine alkaloids contained in comfrey – see box on page 40. Comfrey nonetheless remains valuable as one of the best herbs for healing broken bones, snapped tendons, sprains, strains and bruises.

Once a bone has been set by a qualified person, apply a fresh comfrey poultice. If the fracture is in plaster, take the comfrey up to the edges of the plaster. In addition, use homeopathic comfrey (Symphytum 6x) internally as directed by a homeopath, or – as long as you are not pregnant or breastfeeding – you can drink a couple of cups of comfrey leaf tea a day until the bone heals. Use a leaf or half a large leaf per cup of tea, infusing for 5 minutes.

Comfrey can also be applied to varicose veins, as a poultice. For wounds and ulcers that are open, place mashed comfrey on the skin around the affected part. Comfrey can help heal old wounds such as surgical scars, being applied as a fresh poultice or using the infused oil or ointment. It is also effective on bruises and other injuries to the muscles, ligaments and tendons.

Comfery roots scrapd & boyle in milk is good to eat at night going to bed for a strayn or crik in the back; and boyld in ale to the thickness of a poultice [is] good to aply to a strayn.
– handwritten recipe from Norfolk, eighteenth century

It does not seem to matter much which part of the body is broken, either internally or externally; comfrey will heal it quickly.
– Dr Shook (quoted by Dr Christopher, 1976)

Comfrey's powerful healing effects are partly explained by its allantoin content. This chemical stimulates cell proliferation, which speeds up the healing process, and is also an anti-inflammatory that supports the immune system.

Comfrey is so good at 'knitting' that it must not be used on broken bones until they have been set, or it will start bonding them together in the wrong position. Likewise, do not apply it on deep wounds, which can close at the top before the deep part has healed underneath. St John's wort is better for deep puncture wounds.

Cautions: Do not use comfrey root internally, and do not take comfrey leaf for longer than six weeks at a time. Do not use internally if pregnant or breastfeeding, or give to young children.

Mistaken identities: Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) leaves can easily be confused with comfrey before the plants flower.

Common comfrey's leaves run down the stem to the joint below, giving the stem a winged appearance

Common comfrey is the commonest comfrey in wetter habitats, but the flower colour is very variable, ranging from creamy white through pink to dull purple. The leaves run down onto the stem, with the upper leaves extending right down to the next set of leaves, giving the stem a winged appearance (see photo).

Russian comfrey is the most common comfrey in drier places. Its flowers are bright blue or purple, and the upper stem leaves don't run down the stem, or do so only slightly. **Rough comfrey**, its other parent

plant, has bluish flowers and the upper stem leaves have short stalks and never run down the stem.

Comfrey and the pyrrolizidine alkaloid controversy

Comfrey has come into disrepute in recent years because it contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids. This is a large group of chemicals, some of which are toxic to the liver and can cause hepatic veno-occlusive disease. Poisoning has been reported in people eating other plants with high levels of these alkaloids, and there are a few reported cases of liver damage that appear to be based on the use of comfrey root.

Some herbalists argue that comfrey has been used traditionally and safely for hundreds of years without any problems, but the other side of the argument is that damage could occur gradually over time and not be attributed to the herb.

Another factor is the fact that Russian comfrey has been promoted for its benefits as a fertiliser and in making compost, especially for organic gardeners. It is wonderful for this purpose, but the problem from a medicinal point of view is that this is now the comfrey that most people have growing in their gardens.

Its levels of pyrrolizidine alkaloids are much higher than those of common comfrey, the ‘official’ species of herbalism. Russian comfrey and rough comfrey, both introduced but now naturalised in Britain and Ireland, contain echimidine, the most toxic of the alkaloids, and are best limited to external use.

Russian comfrey is a hybrid between common comfrey and rough comfrey. It appears likely that comfrey was safe to use in the past when only common comfrey grew in Britain. Today the species hybridise readily and can be difficult to tell apart, but see above for guidelines.

It is better to err on the side of caution rather than risk any problems, so it is recommended that no comfrey root be used internally (it contains higher levels of alkaloids than the leaves).

Common comfrey leaf can be taken internally for short periods, not exceeding six weeks at a time. This is long enough to heal a broken bone. Do not take internally during pregnancy, while breastfeeding or if you have liver disease.

Bisset and Wichtl (2001) say that a high level of consumption of the leaves 'as a salad is five or six leaves a day', which would be within the toxic range. Using a couple of leaves a day to make tea should be all right for short-term use, and external use on unbroken skin is considered safe.

Fresh comfrey poultice

Dig up **comfrey roots** and scrub them well. Cut them into shorter lengths and put them in a blender with an equal amount of **fresh comfrey leaf**. Add just enough water to make it blendable, and blend until you have a gooey mess. Spread this onto a piece of gauze and apply to the body part affected, covering with a piece of muslin or cling-film. The gauze makes the poultice easier to remove. Replace poultice daily until healed.

The leaves can also be used on their own as a poultice, but the hairs on them can irritate the skin. To avoid this, blend the leaves with a little water or pound them in a mortar and pestle, and then sandwich the leaf mush between two pieces of muslin before applying to the skin. The muslin will protect the skin from the irritating effects of the leaf hairs, and allow the juices to seep through.

Comfrey poultice

- broken bones
- sprains
- sports injuries
- bruises
- surgical scars

Infused comfrey oil

Pick **comfrey leaves** and let them dry in the shade; then crumble them up and put into a jar big enough to hold them. Pour in **extra virgin olive oil**, and stir well. Top up the jar with a little more oil, put the lid on and place in a sunny part of the garden or on a windowsill for two weeks. Strain off the oil and bottle it, or use it to make an ointment (below).

Comfrey ointment

Put 300ml of **infused comfrey oil** (above) in a small saucepan with **25g beeswax**. The beeswax will melt faster if you grate it or slice it up. Warm

up on low heat until the beeswax melts. Allow to cool slightly, then pour into jars and leave to set before putting the lids on and labelling.

Infused comfrey oil, ointment

- arthritis
- rheumatism
- bursitis
- tendonitis
- phlebitis
- mastitis
- glandular swellings
- pulled muscles
- injured joints
- back injuries
- tendons
- ligaments

Russian comfrey (*S. x uplandicum*) growing in a country lane, Norfolk, July

Couch grass

Elymus repens, syn. *Elytrigia repens*, *Agropyron repens*

This invasive grass is both gardener's foe and herbalist's friend. The couch grass rhizomes that gardeners hate possess soothing, diuretic and antibiotic qualities that have long been valued for making a tea to treat urinary problems, including cystitis, kidney stones and prostate enlargement.

Poaceae Grass family

Description: A grass, up to 1m tall, with a thin flowering spike, dark green pointed leaves and untidy creeping rhizomes.

Habitat: Lawns and gardens, road verges and fields.

Distribution: Widespread worldwide.

Related species: There are two other species of couch in the British Isles – sea couch (*E. atherica*) and sand couch (*E. juncea*) – both found along the coast.

Parts used: Rhizome.

Similar species: The flower spikes of perennial rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) look very similar to couch, but the leaves are shinier and there are no creeping rhizomes.

Garden weeds often attract colourful names that leave little doubt about gardeners' opinions. Couch grass is no exception, its other common names including twitch, quick grass, quack grass, scutch grass, dog's grass, witch grass and foul grass. It quickly spreads in most soils by vigorous white rhizomes (*repens* means creeping) just below the surface and forms a strong, dense root network that crowds out other plants.

Yet its herbal use goes back to classical times, and the love/hate relationship must also be as old. Culpeper, in 1653, puts it like this: 'although a gardener be of another opinion, yet a physician holds half an

acre of them [dog's grass or couch grass] to be worth five acres of Carrots twice told over'.

The name 'couch', according to the herbals, derives from an Anglo-Saxon word, *civice*, for vivacious and long-lasting. Perhaps the herbalists won naming rights here, and it's best to celebrate the vigour of the plant and hope this might transfer to us when we use it.

A successful colonist in garden and field, as are all of our familiar weeds, couch grass has an almost unstoppable capacity to spread. The pale runners or rhizomes give off side branches at intervals of only a few centimetres, and at each node the plant sends up a new shoot and drops a new web of fine roots. The leading runner is described by one writer as a lance that forces its way through any obstacle, including within your prized blooms. And if you leave the tiniest particle of the plant as you pull it or dig it up, it will invariably grow back.

Couch grass can be confused with perennial rye grass (*Lolium perenne*), but this has a wavier flower stalk and alternating darkish green spikelets set close to the stalk. Couch grass has distinct, very flat pale green spikes set at an acute angle to the stem.

At least couch grass is valued in dryland Australia, being planted there to create durable golf courses, grass courts and cricket squares. The binding quality of its rooting system has also been embraced in securing sand dunes, alongside specialist sand grasses.

And while gardeners in Britain may curse and burn their twitch, in mainland Europe it has often been used as a food for cows and horses, and sold as a tisane or tea for human use.

Mike Jones, a coffee plantation manager in Kenya for 26 years, used to spend a month a year getting his workforce to dig out the local couch grass by the deepest roots and burn it, or else it would climb to the top of the coffee bushes. When Julie sent him some couch grass, he said: 'It comes as a bit of a surprise to learn we could have made ourselves a "cup of tea" out of it.'

What has so often been discarded should be more generally valued because it can ease a lot of suffering, and even prevent the need for surgery in some cases. A patient of Julie's, a keen gardener, said when prescribed couch grass, 'but I've burned wheelbarrow loads of it!' He resolved to make better use of it in the future.

Use couch grass for…

The same rhizomes that cause all the gardener's woes are dug up by herbalists, then cleaned, dried and cut into lengths of a few centimetres. Brewed as a tea, the resulting infusion is mild and pleasant to drink.

The white rhizomes of couch grass: ‘a lance that forces its way through any obstacle’

It is an excellent agent in cases of excessive irritability of the bladder *from any cause, lessening the frequency and pain of urination. It is a very efficient agent in cystitis…. The infusion is the best form of administration.*
– King’s American Dispensatory (1898)

It is an effective and long-proven remedy for cystitis, urethritis and prostatitis, combining anti-microbial action with soothing and diuretic properties. In fact, it is almost a urinary formula all in one herb, as it also helps dissolve stones and gravel, as well as preventing them from building up.

John Parkinson, writing in 1640, said that couch grass (or Quich grasse, as he called it) not only dissolved stones in the bladder, but opened ‘obstructions of the liver and gall’, indicating that it might help dissolve gallstones as well.

But it has wider modern uses too. Commission E, the expert panel that judges the safety of herbal medicines for the German government, has approved couch grass in the treatment of bronchitis and laryngitis as well as for bladder infections and kidney stones. It is also used together with other herbs for gout and rheumatism.

There are various other instances of couchgrass being employed in European medicine for liver and gallbladder problems, including jaundice.

Dogs and cats will seek it out as a natural purgative (hence ‘dog’s grass’). Horse owners add couch grass rhizomes to feed to improve their horses’ coats.

Couch grass is untidy in habit, with dead brown leaves typically growing in a clump alongside the flowering spikes, as the image opposite shows, but in supporting its claim on your attention, we invite you to take a look at the geometric beauty of the flowers in close-up (above).

Couch grass tea

The rhizomes can be dug up any time of year, but are best harvested in the spring or autumn. Wash them well, cut into short pieces and then dry them.

Use 2 heaped teaspoonfuls of **dried rhizome** per mug of **boiling water**, and let steep for 10 minutes. Strain and drink, three times a day.

Couch grass tea
- cystitis
- urethritis
- enlarged prostate
- prostatitis
- kidney stone
- irritable bladder
- interstitial cystitis

Curled dock

Rumex crispus

The two common docks are among the five official ‘injurious weeds’ in Britan, but curled dock has long-recognised redeeming qualities as a detoxifying liver and bowel herb, a laxative and a blood cleanser. The root is effective for many chronic toxic skin conditions, including acne and boils, eczema and sunburn, not forgetting the most famous use of dock leaves for relieving the burning caused by nettle stings.

Polygonaceae Dock family

Description: A perennial dock growing to a metre tall. Leaves are long and parallel-sided with wavy margins; tap roots have a brown outer covering and are yellow within.

Habitat: Grassland, disturbed ground, farmyards, road verges, river banks, coastal shingle and mud.

Distribution: Common throughout the British Isles, and native to Europe and Africa, curled dock is one of the most widely distributed plants in the world.

Related species: The other widely distributed species is common or broad-leaved dock (*R. obtusifolius*), with which yellow dock will hybridise. Broad-leaved dock can be used interchangeably with curled dock – the thing to look for is a yellow root in either species, which indicates the presence of the medicinal compounds.

Parts used: Root, dug up in autumn (provided it is yellow, use any species); leaves.

We have included dock in this book even though it is the root that is most used, as it is such a common weed across the world. Found in almost every field, garden and lawn, it is likely you have some growing on your own plot that you can dig up for medicine.

Dock's tap roots are long, slender and deep, going half a metre down; any stray piece left in the soil can sprout into a new plant. Each dock can produce 30,000 or more seeds a year, and these can lay dormant for up to fifty years. It is no wonder it is hard to eliminate. In addition, curled dock and common or broad-leaved dock hybridise freely. It is an almost unstoppable weed, yet one with redeeming medicinal benefits.

Dock's botanical success is official: both common British species are classed as injurious weeds in the Weeds Act 1959 (along with common ragwort, spear thistle and creeping or field thistle). The Act stipulates that farmers should take steps to prevent the spread of these five weeds: a scene like the one opposite of a fallow field filled with autumnal curled dock ought to be harder to find than it still is.

Use curled dock for…

The one thing everybody knows about dock is that you rub its leaves on the skin when stung by nettle. This practice goes back centuries, being mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon leech-books and in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, suggesting docks have always been freely available. Formerly, a chant was sung when applying the dock: in Ireland, it might be 'docken, docken, cure nettle'; in Cornwall, it was along the lines of 'dock leaf, dock leaf, you go in; sting nettle, sting nettle, you come out'.

It is a cooling and astringent treatment, especially the sizeable leaves of broad-leaved dock, although we prefer treating nettle rash by plantain leaves. Digging up a few dock roots, pulping them and applying as a poultice, and renewing this every few hours, is another old nettle standby, as is a root tea. In South Africa, Tswana women warm up dock leaves and apply them to swollen breasts during lactation; they also use the root pulp to treat piles.

Ripening curled dock: a pink bonnet for each seed

Curled dock, by Maria Merian (1717)

Probably the most general practice in all of folk medicine, occurring throughout the British Isles, is rubbing a dock leaf on the skin to ease a sting.
– Allen & Hatfield (2004)

One Anglo-Saxon recipe for reducing a groin swelling (attention, you footballers!) was to pulp dock leaves in grease, wrap in a cabbage leaf that had been warmed in hot ashes, and apply as a plaster. Culpeper (1653) suggested boiling roots in vinegar for bathing itches, scabs and ‘breaking out of the skin’. Modern external uses have added chronic acne, boils, bites, cuts, sunburn, easing rheumatic aches and soothing inflamed gums (using a powder of dried roots).

The reputation of dock as a ‘blood cleanser’ is also ancient, being known in Chinese medicine, Indian Ayurveda and in classical Greece, whence comes dock’s old family name ‘lapathum’ or blood purifier. It was found

that dock transmutes iron in the soil to organic iron in the plant (a real case of alchemy!); old herbalists would add iron filings to soil near dock to ‘enrich’ it. This property makes dock effective for iron-deficiency anaemia and for period problems, especially in younger women.

Dock also has a laxative effect in which it stimulates gut motions; indeed it was once used as a purgative. It is a good natural remedy for constipation, reflux and acid stomach, and has been called a ‘superlative remedy’ for enteritis, colitis, diarrhoea and dysentery.

Dock’s twin qualities to cleanse and to lower heat make it an ideal liver detox treatment, including for jaundice and ‘liver stagnation’, when the flow of bile is congested, and for disorders of the spleen and lymph. A healthy liver means a healthy skin, and dock works on both; the advice is to use small quantities over a long period.

Dock root gives a gluten-free flour, once a famine food. The young leaves of curled dock cook as a tasty spring vegetable with a light lemony taste, and are good in nettle soup. Avoid too much raw dock, though, as it contains oxalic acid, which is toxic in quantity.

Harvesting dock

Dig up the roots in late summer or autumn. Large older plants are more likely to have a strong yellow colour to their roots. Scrub them well, and cut off the tops.

Curled dock tincture

Fill a jar with chopped-up **dock roots**. Pour **vodka** in until the roots are covered and put the lid on tightly. Keep in a cool dark place for a month, ideally shaking the jar every day or two.

Strain off, using a press or squeezing through a jelly bag. Bottle the liquid, remembering to label it. This tincture will keep for about five years in a cool dark place.

Dose: Half a teaspoonful once or twice daily as a cleansing tonic.

Take when the bowels are sluggish, for anaemia and poor absorption of nutrients (if the edge of your tongue shows scalloping from your teeth), for skin problems and any time you feel a bit slow and tired.

Curled dock tincture

- poor absorption

• anaemia
• skin problems
• sluggish bowels
• liver congestion
• constipation

Curled dock root in cross-section,
showing the yellow colour

An East Anglian cure for jaundice
(collected by Elizabeth Hicks, late eighteenth century)

Take 1 oz of red Doc. Seed dry, boil it in 3 pints of water till 1 pint is nearly wasted then strain it of and add 3 gill glasses of white Wine.
Dose take a gill glass 3 times a day when the stomach is the emptiest, this will be 4 days in taken, then stop 2 days and repeat the Medicine which will with the Blessing of God compleat the Cure be the Jaundice ever so bad.

The wavy leaf edge (and typical snail hole) of curled dock

Dandelion

Taraxacum officinale

Dandelion is a wonderful food as well as a beneficial medicine. It supports overall health by gently working to improve the functioning of the liver, gallbladder, and urinary and digestive systems. It is excellent for cleansing the skin.

Next time you spend an hour removing dandelions from your garden or lawn, turn them into medicine instead of throwing them out, and rejoice in the fact that they will always grow back!

Asteraceae (Compositae) Daisy family

Description: A familiar weed of lawns, with bright yellow flowers, seed ‘clocks’, a bitter white latex in the stem and a long tap root.

Habitat: Lawns, fields and roadside verges.

Distribution: Worldwide in temperate zones.

Related species: There are actually 250 or so species within *Taraxacum officinale* in the British Isles. These are divided into nine sections and are very difficult to distinguish. Most common forms of dandelion belong to the *Ruderalia* section. They are all safe medicinal plants. In Chinese medicine, *T. mongolicum* is used to clear heat and toxicity.

Parts used: Leaves, roots, flowers and sap.

Dandelions: where to begin? They do so much! They were once much used in Britain as a spring tonic, and still are in Europe. In the US fresh dandelion leaves for salads was a $3m a year industry in 1999.

Dandelions have followed European settlers around the world, though it is probably native in China and most of Asia. Most people know them as lawn weeds, but we're prepared to upset the gardeners to say: consider the benefits of a lawn of brightly blooming dandelions. Can grass give you salad, tasty fritters, wine, a coffee substitute, tea, useful medicine and more besides?

This plant is almost indestructible: it is a perennial and, unusually, it is self-fertilising; its deep tap roots make it hard to dig out, and any pieces left will regenerate. Its seeds soar miles on little parachutes, whether or not helped by children playing the 'clock' game. It flowers almost all year long.

Any amount of mowing, herbicide and flamethrowing fail to eradicate this sunny plant from the garden. Really, you'll be happier if you view dandelions as a culinary and medicinal gift, a superb 'cut and come again' crop, rather than as an annoying weed!

An old companion of man, it has accumulated many names. Blowball and telltime refer to the seeds, priest's crown to the stem after the seeds have flown, and swine's snout to the unopened flower. And 'dandelion' itself? The 'teeth of the lion' (*dent de lion*) explanation, from the appearance of the saw-edged leaves or perhaps the tiny florets, is found in many languages. But there is also a case made for an older link to the sun.

In many cultures the lion has been the animal symbol of the sun since antiquity, as in the astrological sign Leo. Dandelions are yellow discs, like the sun, and open and close along with it. So, perhaps the old name might mean 'rays of the sun' rather than 'teeth of the lion'? In any case the Chinese, who have long used the dandelion, have even better names for it: two are 'yellow-flowered earth-nail' and 'golden hairpin weed'.

It is very effectual for the obstructions of the liver, gall and spleen, and the distempers that arise therefrom, jaundice and the hypochondriacal passion. It wonderfully opens the urinary tract.
– Coles (1657)

An ancient connection with man: dandelions at Avebury, April

Use dandelion for…

It is high in minerals, especially potassium, and vitamins A, B, C and D. The young leaves boiled up into a tea or eaten fresh in salads are detoxifiers, clearing blood and lymph by increasing elimination through the kidneys and bowels. This in turn benefits overall health.

If dandelion says ‘think spring’, it also suggests ‘think liver’. It has a reputation as a safe liver herb, especially where there are toxins and heat in the blood. The plant’s chemicals cause the gallbladder to contract, releasing bile, stimulating the liver to produce more.

Liver-related conditions aided by dandelion include jaundice and hepatitis, gallstones and urinary tract infection, painful menopause, PMT

and menstruation; improvements are achievable in the pancreas, spleen, skin and eyesight.

A herbal monograph on dandelion lists two pages of remedies, from abscess and acne to varicose veins and venereal warts; to this author it is a ‘self-contained pharmacy’.

It is the bitterness in dandelion leaves that makes them so good for your digestion. The bitter taste stimulates secretion of digestive fluids, including stomach acid, bile and pancreatic juices. Dandelion promotes the appetite, and is recommended for those who have been ill or have lost their enthusiasm for food in advanced age.

Roasted dandelion root is a well-known and caffeine-free coffee substitute. We grind the roasted root with a few pods of cardamon just before brewing; it’s also tasty with cinnamon and fennel seed. The root can also be eaten as a boiled vegetable.

The flowers don’t look very edible, but they are surprisingly good eaten straight off the plant, mild and slightly sweet. Eating a few dandelion flowers often relieves a headache too. They are delicious washed, dipped wet into flour and fried in butter until golden brown. This needs to be a lunch dish, as the flowers only open when the sun is shining, and they are too bitter when picked in the evening.

One of Julie’s first paid jobs as a girl in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, was collecting paper bags full of dandelion heads for a neighbour to make dandelion wine. This wine is a beautiful golden colour, like distilled sunshine. The flowers also yield a refreshing dandelion ‘beer’ and a face wash.

The sap or latex of the stems was once used in patent medicines, and was said to remove freckles and age spots, corns and warts, to help hair grow, and treat bee stings and blisters.

Dandelion is known as ‘piss-en-lit’ in French, ‘pissabed’ in English, and is justly renowned for its diuretic properties, that is, increasing the flow

of urine. What is less familiar is how well it strengthens the urinary system. It is effective in treating bed-wetting in children and incontinence in older people. All parts of the plant have this effect, but especially the leaves.

With most diuretic drugs potassium is lost from the body and has to be supplemented, but dandelion is naturally high in potassium. It can safely be used long term without causing imbalance. The leaves boiled with vegetable peelings make a potassium-rich broth.

Dandelions will grow almost anywhere, from cracks in pavements to car bonnets. They are wonderfully adaptable survivors.

Dandelions may well be the world's most famous weed…. Up until the 1800s, [American] people would actually pull the grass out of their yards to make room for dandelions and other useful 'weeds' such as chickweed, malva, and chamomile.
– Mars (1999)

Dandelion's diuretic effect makes it a good herb for treating swollen ankles, for fluid retention and high blood pressure. It can also be used to alleviate shortness of breath in the elderly.

As a medicine the whole plant is invaluable for liver and gallbladder problems, and for skin complaints including eczema and acne. Its action helps reduce high blood pressure, high cholesterol and the pain of arteriosclerosis and joints, digestive problems, chronic illness, viral infections, and heart and lung irregularities.

Dandelion can form part of a natural cancer treatment, and taken regularly as a food and medicine may help prevent some cancers, especially breast cancer, and other chronic illnesses by keeping the body clean, toned and healthy.

Dandelion sap
- warts
- calluses
- corns
- rough skin

Dandelion salad
- sluggish liver
- constipation
- urinary problems
- fluid retention

Dandelion tincture

The root or the leaves can be tinctured separately for specific uses, but for general use we prefer to use the whole plant. Dig up **dandelion plants**, wash the dirt off and remove any dead leaves. The plants can be left whole or chopped up. Place in a jar large enough to hold them, and pour enough **vodka** in to cover the plants completely.

Put the jar in a cool place out of sunlight. If you chop up your plants, the tincture can be ready in as little as two weeks, otherwise leave it for a month before straining, squeezing the residue in a jelly bag or piece of muslin to get all the liquid out. Pour it into clean amber or blue glass bottles, label and store until needed.

Dosage

- For general health maintenance, take half a teaspoonful twice daily.
- For acute skin eruptions, take 10 drops in water frequently throughout

the day until the skin clears.

• For digestive problems, recuperation from chronic illness, sluggish liver, arthritis, gout, eczema and psoriasis, take half to 1 teaspoonful three times daily in water.

• For overindulgence in food or drink, take 10 drops in water every hour until you are feeling better.

Dandelion tincture

• skin problems
• sluggish liver
• constipation
• urinary problems
• fluid retention
• arthritis
• gout
• hangovers
• chronic illness

Dandelion flower beer

Pick 100 **dandelion flowers**. Boil 2 litres of **water** with 100g **light brown sugar** until the sugar has dissolved. Allow to cool until tepid, then pour over the dandelion flowers in a large container. Add **a lemon**, finely sliced.

Cover the container with a clean cloth and set aside in a cool place for three or four days, stirring occasionally. Strain and pour into tightly corked bottles. The beer will be ready to drink in just a few days.

Dandelion flower infused oil

Pick enough **dandelion flowers** to fill a clean, dry jam jar. Pour in **extra virgin olive oil** slowly, allowing it to seep down around the flowers until the jar is full and there are no air pockets left.

Cover the jar with a piece of cloth held in place with a rubber band, and put the jar in a warm sunny place. It can be left outdoors during the day if the weather is clear, and brought in at night, or left on a sunny window ledge. The cloth cover lets any moisture escape. You may need to prod the flowers down to keep them immersed in the oil, as they can go mouldy if left in the air.

After a week or two, or when the flowers are limp and have lost their colour, strain off the oil. If you put the flowers in a cloth or jelly bag to squeeze out the oil you may get some juice as well, so you'll need to let the oil stand for a while in a jug. This will allow any water to sink to the bottom. The oil can then be carefully poured off into bottles, leaving the watery bits at the bottom of the jug.

Dandelion flower oil is an excellent rub for muscle tension and cold, stiff joints. It is good for dry skin, and can be rubbed into the delicate skin

around the eyes. Don’t forget this oil can be eaten too, adding a taste of sunshine to salads and other foods.

For external use, you can add essential oils to your home-made flower oil, using up to 20 drops per 100ml of oil. The essential oils act as a natural preservative, and bring their own healing qualities to the mixture. Lavender, ylang ylang and rosemary all combine well with dandelion.

Dandelion flower infused oil

- muscle tension
- muscle aches
- stiff necks
- arthritis

Elder coming into flower, Lincolnshire Wolds, June

Elder

Sambucus nigra

If ever the soul of a plant has been fought for, it is elder. An important herb through the ages, it has been described as a whole medicine-chest in one plant. Less used now than formerly, its flowers remain a wonderful fever remedy and delicious in drinks or desserts. The berries work against 'flu and colds, and help relieve coughs. The leaves, as an ointment, are good for bruises.

Adoxaceae Moschatel family

Description: A shrub or small tree, with fragrant clusters of creamy white flowers in summer, followed by black berries in autumn.

Habitat: Hedgerows, riverbanks, woods and waste ground.

Distribution: Common throughout the British Isles except in parts of Scotland. Native to Europe.

Related species: American elder (*Sambucus canadensis*), with its dark purple berries, is naturalised on railway banks, and can be used interchangeably with our elder.The North American red-berried elder (*S. racemosa*) is naturalised, mainly in Scotland, and should not be used. Dwarf elder (*S. ebulus*), which is another introduced species, can be used but is not common.

Parts used: Flowers, berries and leaves.

Few plants are as steeped in folklore, legend and superstition as the elder. Its hollow stem was said to have been used by Prometheus to bring fire to man from the gods, and the Saxon *aeld* ('fire') may have given elder its name. The same empty stem was a readymade flute, and the species name *sambucus* was chosen by Linnaeus for a flute made of elder.

Elder was faerie and pagan. If you were in the company of the tree on Midsummer night you would see the Faery King ride by. Another version

of our name ‘elder’ was from Hylde Moer, the elder or earth mother – when an elder planted itself in your garden it meant the mother had chosen to protect your house from lightning and your cattle from harm. You must never cut down an elder or burn it, because the mother was present, without asking her leave.

So entrenched was the cult of the elder mother that the Church vilified elder with its most powerful negative associations: Christ was said to have been crucified on an elder tree and Judas to have hanged himself on one.

And if that seemed to stretch credulity, judging by the tree’s weak branches, there was something else: God had cursed elder by making its once large black berries small and its straight branches twisted. Such sanctioned hostility was borne out in a verse on elder quoted by Robert Chambers in his *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (1847):

Bour-tree, bour-tree, cookit rung,/ Never straight, and never strong,/ Ever bush and never tree/ Since our Lord was nailed t’ye.

Its rank smell has always been held against elder. The leaves were once sold as a fly repellent, and it was bad luck to have the flowers indoors. A rhyme went:

Hawthorn blooms and elderflowers / Fill the house with evil powers.

The plant was redolent of sex and death, the greatest taboos, yet a Puritan like John Evelyn could see beyond this to its medicinal virtues: ‘though the leaves are somewhat rank of smell and so not commendable in sallet, they are of the most sovereign virtue’. An extract of the berries would ‘assist longaevity’ and was ‘a kind of *catholicon* against all infirmities whatsoever… every part of the tree being useful’.

If the medicinal properties of its leaves, bark, berries &c. were thoroughly known, I cannot tell what our countrey-men could ail, for which he might not fetch a remedy from every hedge, either for sickness, or wound.
– Evelyn (1664)

What says my Aesculapius? my Galen? my heart of Elder?
– Shakespeare, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, II.3.1126.

The battle for control of elder has always swung like this. It was a tree of life, yet a devil's tree; it was needed, hence a good herb in the monastery garden; it was feared, so it was a witch's plant.

Yet survive it has, in town and country alike, on any patch of waste ground. Of all the wild plants in this book elderflower is the one harvested for commercial use, for cordials and other drinks.

Elderflower drinks are also widely made at home, and chemists' shops often run out of citric acid during the elderflower season!

Strangely, the berries are often ignored in Britain these days, but they make a lovely wine and are delicious cooked with apples (and were once

widely used to adulterate wine and true ports).

Use elder for…

Elder blossom is one of the best herbs for encouraging sweating to break a fever, when drunk as a hot tea, as Julie recalls:

'I was visiting my parents once in Namibia when my mother came down with a slight fever. I had seen an elder blooming in a nearby park, so dosed her with a tea of the fresh flowers before tucking her in bed. The elder worked so well that she became drenched in sweat and thought she had malaria. But a blood test was clear.'

The flower tea 'clears the channels' in the body, promoting elimination via the skin and the urinary tract, and supporting the circulation. Elderflowers cut congestion and inflammations of the upper respiratory tract, and break up catarrh. They reduce the symptoms of hayfever, often used with nettle tops.

Elderflower products are also used internally and externally to help clean the skin. A distilled water of the flowers made a eyewash in the 1600s, and helped remove freckles and spots, and was used to cool sunburn; it will still work today.

Elderberries are well known for reducing the length and severity of colds and 'flu, and can be used to help prevent infection. They are an excellent winter standby.

Cautions: Do not eat the leaves. Some books say elderberries are toxic and shouldn't be eaten raw. This refers to the seeds of the berries, especially the red-berried elders. Elderberries can cause diarrhoea if eaten raw in quantity, but as a food they are more usually cooked and thus completely safe. In a tincture or glycerite the seeds are strained out.

Elder leaf ointment

Warm 250ml **extra virgin olive oil** in a small pan and add a couple of handfuls of chopped **elder leaves**. Simmer gently until the leaves are crisp, then strain. Return the oil to the pan. Melt 25g **beeswax** in the oil,

then pour into ointment jars. Leave to cool and set before putting the lids on and labelling. Use for bruises, sprains and chilblains.

Elder leaf ointment
- bruises
- sprains
- chilblains

Harvesting elderflowers

Pick elderflowers on a dry sunny day, choosing those that smell lemony and fresh. In damp weather or in shady places the flowers can have an unpleasant smell. Pick the whole head of flowers. If you are drying them for tea, spread the heads on brown paper to dry, and then use a fork to strip the blossoms off the stems.

Elderflower tea

This can be made with fresh flowers, but as their season is relatively short, the dried flowers are usually used.

Use 1 heaped teaspoonful of **dried flowers** per cupful of **boiling water**. Cover and allow to infuse for 3 to 5 minutes. Strain and drink hot and frequently for the early stages of a cold or fever, to promote sweating. For this, it combines well with equal parts of yarrow and mint. For hayfever, use in combination with nettle leaves.

Drink cold for its diuretic effect and for menopausal hot flushes, or use as a face wash.

Elderflower hot tea
- fevers
- colds and 'flu
- promotes sweating
- use in bath
- hay fever

Elderflower cold tea
- night sweats
- promotes urination
- hot flushes
- fluid retention
- use as a face wash

Elderflower glycerite

Pack heads of **elder blossom** into a large jar, then fill with **vegetable glycerine**, stirring to release any air bubbles. Put the lid on and place the jar in a warm place, on a sunny window ledge or by a range cooker, and leave for two weeks. Strain using a jelly bag or a press. Bottle the liquid, label and store in a cool dark place. You can use this glycerite as is, or add elderberries in the autumn (see next page).

Dose: 1 teaspoonful as needed for sore throats. For a clear complexion and smooth skin, mix half and half with rosewater and use freely as a face lotion.

Elderflower glycerite
• sore throats

• stuffy noses
• hot flushes
• face lotion

For a cold
Elder flowers dry boyled in milk & drink it at night. It weill sweat & do much good.
– Book of culinary recipes 1739–79

Elderflower cordial

Pick 30 heads of **elderflower** on a dry sunny day, choosing those that smell lemony and fresh.

Boil **1kg sugar** in **2 litres of water** for about 5 minutes in a large saucepan. Pour into a large ceramic bowl and add **50g citric acid**, a **chopped lemon** and a **chopped orange**.

Add the **elderflower heads** and stir well. Cover with a clean cloth and leave for 4 days, stirring every day. Strain through a jelly bag and bottle. For long-term storage, the cordial can be frozen.

To drink, dilute to taste with cool sparkling water. It can also be made with hot water to encourage sweating in colds and fevers.

Elderflower cordial
• hot flushes
• colds
• sore throats

Harvesting elderberries

Pick bunches of elderberries when they are ripe and black but still firm and shiny. The easiest way to strip them from their stems is to use a fork.

Elderberry glycerite

Fill a large jar with **elderberries**, and pour in **vegetable glycerine** or elderflower glycerite to fill the gaps until the jar is full. Place in a warm spot, on a sunny window ledge or by a range cooker, and leave for two weeks. Strain and squeeze the juice out of the berries, using a jelly bag or a press. Bottle the liquid, label and store in a cool dark place.

This can be used on its own for coughs and sore throats or mixed with cherry bark syrup (see page 25).

Elderberry Glycerite
- coughs
- colds
- 'flu

Elderberry syrup

Put **ripe elderberries** into a large saucepan with half their volume of water. Simmer and stir for twenty minutes. Allow to cool, then squeeze out the juice using a jelly bag or fruit press.

Measure the juice, and for every 500ml of juice add 250g **muscovado sugar**, a **stick of cinnamon**, a few **cloves** and a few **slices of lemon**. Simmer for 20 minutes, then strain and pour while hot into sterilised bottles.

Dose: Take 1 teaspoonful neat every few hours for colds and 'flu, or use it as a cordial and add boiling water to taste for a hot drink.

Elderberry syrup
- coughs
- colds
- 'flu

… To press and make their eldern berry wine/ That bottled up becomes a rousing charm/ To kindle winters icy bosom warm/ That wi its merry partner nut brown beer/ Makes up the peasants christmass keeping cheer.
– John Clare, ‘October’, *The Shepherd’s Calendar* (1827)

Guelder rose, Crampbark

Viburnum opulus

Guelder rose is able to relieve muscle tension, both in skeletal muscles and in the smooth muscle of the intestines, lungs and uterus. It is used on its own for cramps and muscle spasms, including uterine cramps, back pain, fibromyalgia and irritable bowel syndrome, and in formulae for high blood pressure, arthritis and nervous tension.

Caprifoliaceae Honeysuckle family

Description: A large shrub or small tree with palmate leaves, white blossoms and vivid red berries.

Habitat: Hedgerows, woodlands, fens and scrubland.

Distribution: Widely distributed throughout England, Wales and Ireland and scattered in Scotland. Native to Eurasia and North America.

Related species: There are around 150 species in the genus worldwide. Black haw (*V. prunifolium*) from the eastern USA has similar herbal uses.

Parts used: Bark, harvested while the tree is in leaf.

This beautiful native tree should be more widely planted in gardens for its all-year generosity. It has showy creamy-white flowerheads in early summer, while in late summer and autumn the berries ripen to a stunning scarlet, their translucence lending them a gorgeous glow, and the foliage

colours intensify as the weather cools. The berries are edible, and make a delicious jelly. And if you need more reasons to grow Guelder rose, there are all the medicinal uses of the bark!

Luckily, it is also a common tree in damp woodlands and hedgerows. It has been used medicinally for centuries (Chaucer mentions it), and the name could derive from the town of Guelders, on the former German–Dutch border. Another possibility comes from its superficial similarity to elder, in the same family, reflected in the old common names water elder and white eller. Gerard calls it rose elder or Gelders rose. Crampbark is a more recent name, which well captures its principal use today.

Guelder rose really helps in rheumatic conditions where the pain is from tension rather than inflammation, easing the pain and improving blood flow to the affected area. It is a great remedy to take at the first onset of both migraines and tension headaches, and by relaxing the blood vessels it helps with high blood pressure, Raynaud’s syndrome, restless legs, cramps and menstrual pain.

Guelder rose: the small yellowish flowers in the centre are fertile while the large white flowers surrounding them are sterile.

… possibly one of the best herbs known for preventing miscarriage due to stress and anxiety, and is specifically used for relaxing the uterine muscles … among my favorite remedies for menstrual cramps.
– Gladstar (1993)

… will speedily quiet the uneasiness and relieve the pains of uterine and abdominal cramps and is a remedy for nervous disorders and spasms of all kinds.
– Dr Christopher (1996)

Harvesting Guelder rose

Guelder rose bark can be harvested any time of year, but is usually harvested in the spring or early summer. Use a small knife to remove the bark in short strips, taking care not to take too much from any branch and not to ring the limb, or it will die. The bark can be used fresh, or dried for later use.

Decocted Guelder rose tincture

Put the pieces of **bark** you have harvested in a small saucepan, and add enough **water** to just allow them to float. Bring to the boil, then turn down the heat and simmer gently for 10 minutes. Leave to cool, then strain off the liquid. Measure it, add an equal amount of **vodka** and pour into a jar with the bark pieces you've just boiled. If you are making the tincture in autumn, you can add a few ripe berries to the jar too. Keep the jar in a cool dark place for a month, shaking it every day if you can remember. Strain off the liquid, bottle and label.

Dose: 2–5ml in water, two to three times a day. For acute conditions, you can add 15ml to a glass of water and sip frequently. The tincture can also be used as a liniment rub for aching muscles.

Decocted Guelder rose tincture

- cramps
- menstrual pain
- headache
- muscle spasm
- backache
- spastic constipation

- IBS
- high blood pressure
- restless legs
- rheumatic pain
- Raynaud’s syndrome
- poor circulation in hands and feet

Hawthorn

*Crataegus monogyna, C. laevigata (*syn. *C. oxyacantha)*

Hawthorn is a superb heart and circulatory tonic, protecting and strengthening the heart muscle and its blood supply. It improves blood circulation around the body, and can be used to treat a wide range of circulatory problems.

Hawthorn also affects the emotional side of what we think of as 'heart', by calming and reducing anxiety, helping with bad dreams and insomnia, and smoothing menopausal mood swings.

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: Thorny shrubs or small trees with clusters of white or pink flowers in spring followed by deep red berries in autumn.

Habitat: Hedgerows, scrub and woodland margins.

Distribution: Hawthorn (*C. monogyna*) is common throughout the British Isles, while Midland hawthorn (*C. laevigata*) is found in south-eastern England, and occasionally naturalised elsewhere. They can be used interchangeably. The pink and red flowering hawthorns found in gardens and parkland are generally varieties of Midland hawthorn.

Related species: There are over 200 species worldwide, found in northern temperate regions. Several of these are planted as ornamentals in parks and gardens. Chinese haw (*C. pinnatifidia*) is used in Chinese medicine to calm the spirit.

Parts used: Flowering tops, leaves and ripe berries.

Hawthorn is the hedgerow plant of *the* British Isles. It is the most commonly found species in our hedges and spinneys, both historically and in present planting; its very name means ‘hedge-thorn’. It bounds fields and keeps stock in, it grows steadily, is readily plashed and managed, survives poor soils and high winds, and was long a sacred, protective presence.

Hawthorn is well known today as a herbal remedy for the heart and circulation, but this is a relatively new use. Old European herbals mainly talk of hawthorn for ‘the stone’ and for drawing out thorns and splinters, and an occasional use for treating gout and insomnia. It’s perhaps surprising that it wasn’t thought of for the blood, because the berries are such a deep blood-like colour, and colour was often taken as an indication of healing possibilities. Anne Pratt’s mid-Victorian survey of British flowering plants (1857) expressed a conventional, and what could be called a pre-modern, view of hawthorn’s value:

The chief use of the Hawthorn is for those green impenetrable hedges which bound our meadows and lanes, which are so hardy that they are not even killed by the sea breeze, and which when whitened by their flowers are one of the greatest beauties of the rural landscape…

The modern tale of hawthorn (there are many ancient ones too) begins with a Dr Green in County Clare, Ireland, in late Victorian times. The doctor had singular success in treating heart disease, but refused to

divulge the secret of his medicine. When he died, in 1894, his daughter disclosed that he had been using a tincture of ripe hawthorn berries.

Dr JC Jennings of Chicago wrote up the story for the *New York Medical Journal* in 1896, and the use of hawthorn tincture for a variety of heart problems quickly caught on on both sides of the Atlantic.

Here is a case history recorded by another Dr Jennings, this time MC, and published in *A Treatise on Crataegus* in 1917. It is suggestive of the high esteem in which some doctors had soon come to hold hawthorn for heart treatments:

Mr B., aged 73 years. I found him gasping for breath when I entered the room, with a pulse rate of 158 and very feeble; great oedema of lower limbs and abdomen. A more desperate case could hardly be found.

I gave him fifteen drops of Crataegus *in half a wineglass of water. In fifteen minutes the pulse beat was 126 and stronger, and breathing was not so labored. In twenty-five minutes pulse beat 110 and the force was still increasing, breathing much easier.*

He now got ten drops in same quantity of water, and in one hour from the time I entered the house he was, for the first time in ten days, able to lie horizontally on the bed. I made an examination of the heart and found mitral regurgitation from valvular deficiency, with great enlargement.

This clinical success would have been a surprise to earlier generations of doctors and herbalists, as well as to contemporaries. Hawthorn had always had a mixed reputation in popular lore, and for it to be a demonstrably useful heart herb was unexpected.

There is something exciting about hedgerow plants with white spring flowers and dark berries in the autumn. Both elder and hawthorn were fertility symbols of pre-Christian British peoples, and both plants were long ago absorbed by the incoming religion.

The great value of hawthorn is that, although it can have profound healing effects, it achieves these in a gentle and supportive way.
– Conway (2001)

Hawthorn was appropriated as forming Christ's crown of thorns and as being the 'burning bush' seen by Moses. The Glastonbury thorn was the best known of the English holy hawthorns.

In its old name of May, hawthorn was the very plant of May Day's plaited crowns and the maypole, much tamer echoes of earlier rites; yet this abundant, fertile spring plant was and still sometimes is unlucky to bring into the house.

Perhaps it was the smell of the flowers, which gives some people hayfever or was said to have lingered from the Great Plague of London; it was also reminiscent of the taboos, of death and putrefaction but also of sex. On the other hand, an old proverb gave a softer view of hawthorn's erotic power:

The fair maid who, the first of May,/ Goes to the fields at break of day,/ And washes in dew from the hawthorn tree,/ Will ever after handsome be.

Use hawthorn for…

Long the plant of the heart in folklore, we know now that hawthorn works in several ways as a restorative of the physical heart. It has the wonderful capacity to dilate the coronary arteries and strengthen the heart muscle without raising blood pressure or increasing the beat.

The berries, leaf and flowers can be used to treat angina, enlargement of the heart from overwork or excessive exercise, and heart damage from over-use of alcohol.

It is important to state that heart disease is a life-threatening illness, and should be treated under the advice of a primary healthcare practitioner such as your GP or a qualified professional herbalist. If you are taking beta-blockers, only use hawthorn under supervision.

Unlike digitalis and numerous commercial preparations, hawthorn is a prophylactic with few side effects. It can – and we'd say should – be made part of personal regime to forestall future problems with the heart and circulation.

Hawthorn lowers high blood pressure and helps dissolve cholesterol and calcium deposits, making it good for arteriosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, and plaquing.

When a fatty plaque comes loose from an artery wall it can rapidly lead to a blockage. If the artery involved is the coronary artery, which feeds the heart muscle, this blockage will mean a heart attack; if a plaque blocks an artery in the brain, it will cause a stroke. Arteries anywhere in the body can be affected, but problems often go unnoticed.

Hawthorn is also an effective treatment for intermittent claudication, where the blood vessels of the legs aren't supplying enough oxygen to the muscles, resulting in pain on walking. Similar conditions, such as Buerger's disease and Raynaud's disease, also benefit from hawthorn's gentle effects.

Hawthorn enhances the functioning of the heart and circulation during exercise, and taken in moderation can improve athletic performance. Also, the flavonoid compounds called procyanidins found throughout the plant help normalise blood pressure. So, if blood pressure is too high, hawthorn will lower it, and if too low it will stimulate the heart rate and raise it.

Taking hawthorn calms the spirit, and gives good results in menopausal mood swings, restlessness and anxiety; it will quieten overactive children who have ADHD.

Hawthorn combines well with yarrow when there is constriction of the blood vessels and a risk of thrombosis or clotting. As a general heart and circulatory tonic, it is used alongside ramsons or garlic, and ginger. If the

circulation needs stimulating, take it with horseradish. To improve the peripheral circulation of the limbs, use hawthorn with lime blossom.

Hawthorn berry leather

Pick ripe **hawthorn berries** and place in a saucepan with half their volume of **water**. Simmer gently for about 15 minutes and allow to cool. Blend the mixture briefly to loosen the pulp from the seeds or mash it with a potato masher, then rub the pulp through a coarse sieve.

Pour this strained pulp into baking trays so that it is less than half a centimetre thick, and put the trays in an oven at the lowest temperature setting to dry. If you have a food dehydrator, you can put the fruit leather trays in that, following the manufacturer's instructions. Leave until the pulp is dry and leathery and can be peeled off the trays without being sticky. Cut up and store in airtight jars. Eat about a 2cm square every day to help keep your heart and circulation healthy.

Hawthorn berry fruit leather

- heart tonic
- circulatory tonic

Hawthorn berry syrup

Put 500g **berries** in a large saucepan with 500ml **water**, and slowly bring to a boil. Mash a little with a potato masher. Turn off the heat and leave to stand overnight. Bring to a boil again, then turn down the heat and

simmer gently. The berries quickly lose their deep red colour and turn a dingy sort of yellow. Don't worry if the decoction smells somewhat fishy at this point – the syrup will not taste like it smells.

When the mixture has sweated down to half its volume, allow to cool and then squeeze out the juice. Weigh the juice and put back into the saucepan with an equal weight of **sugar**. Bring rapidly to the boil, then pour while still warm into sterilised bottles. The finished syrup often has a strawberry-like flavour. You can use honey instead of sugar for this syrup, but the honey version does not keep as well.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful daily as a heart tonic or use as a flavouring.

Hawthorn berry syrup
- heart tonic
- hardening of the arteries
- abnormal blood pressure
- mild angina
- anxiety, restlessness

Hawthorn tincture

The best hawthorn tincture is made in two parts, using the flowers and leaves gathered in spring and then adding the berries in the autumn when they are ripe.

In spring: Gather the **flowering tops** when the blossom is young and fresh. Remove any large twigs, and pack into a jar. Fill the jar with **vodka**, put the lid on and shake the jar to remove any air bubbles. Put the jar in a cupboard for about a month, until the blossom and leaves have lost their colour, then strain off the liquid and bottle it.

In autumn: Put the **berries** in a blender with enough **hawthorn flower tincture** to cover (if you don't have enough, you can add **vodka**), and blend to a mush. Pour the mixture into wide-mouthed jars – important because hawthorn berries have so much pectin that the whole mixture will set solid, and you'll find it impossible to get it out of a narrow-necked bottle. Leave the jars in a cool dark place for a month, then poke a knife into the jar to chop the contents enough to get them out. Squeeze

the liquid out using a jelly bag – this is good exercise! If you have a juice press, use that as it will be a lot less work.

Bottle and label your tincture. This will keep for several years, although it's best to make a fresh lot every year if you can.

Dose: 1 teaspoon once a day as a general tonic; 1 teaspoon three times a day or as advised by your herbalist for circulatory problems.

Flowers, leaves and berries

- heart tonic
- hardening of the arteries
- abnormal blood pressure
- palpitations
- irregular heart beat
- mild angina
- anxiety, restlessness
- intermittent claudication

Caution: Only take hawthorn alongside beta-blockers and other cardiovascular drugs if you are under the professional supervision of a herbal or medical practitioner.

Honeysuckle, Woodbine

Lonicera periclymenum

Honeysuckle is esteemed for its superb scent and lovely flowers but should also be valued as a cooling herb. It has benefits for menopausal hot flushes, 'flu, fevers, heat stroke, urinary tract infections and other hot conditions. The flowers have similar qualities to aspirin and are strongly antiseptic, being effective against a range of micro-organisms.

Caprifoliaceae Honeysuckle family

Description: A twining deciduous shrub with fragrant white, yellow and red flowers followed by red berries.

Habitat: Hedgerows, woodland and scrub.

Distribution: Found throughout the British Isles.

Related species: There are around 180 honeysuckle species worldwide, several with medicinal qualities. Japanese honeysuckle (*L. japonica*) is a popular garden plant now naturalised in Australia and North America, with similar medicinal uses to woodbine.

Parts used: Flowers, harvested when in bloom during late spring, summer or autumn.

Honeysuckle must be among the best-loved of wild and garden plants. It has the sweetest and most intoxicating of fragrances, and its attractive

white, yellow and red flowers keep on blooming through spring and summer. It forms lovely bowers that offer dappled shade around cottage front doors; it is irresistible to the bees and hawk moths that pollinate it; and honeysuckle's scarlet berries in autumn are food for many birds.

Its intertwining habit has made it the very symbol of love in many cultures. Honeysuckle flowers were once thought too dangerous to keep indoors because the scent would give forbidden thoughts to young ladies. Our national bard knew well its mythic power, using it as an image of lovers sleeping enfolded in each other's arms in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Honeysuckle was probably more common in Shakespeare's day, as England was so heavily wooded. The very old common names woodbine or woodbind recall this origin, and the twining habit.

Modern foresters are not quite so taken with the way honeysuckle twists around hazel stems, leaving permanent grooves that lower the commercial value. These twisted hazel stems, though, were once highly prized for making into twirly walking sticks that were said to help suitors win the woman of their dreams.

The Elizabethans would have been as interested in honeysuckle's medicinal properties as its beauty or romantic associations. They would not have known that its leaves and flowers are rich in salicylic acid, a compound similar to aspirin. But they would have been well aware that an infusion of the flowers or leaves was good for headaches, fevers, bronchial complaints and rheumatism, as it is today.

Modern herbalists favour the flowers over the leaves, but the bitter berries are seldom used, except for serious vomiting or diarrhoea. Any of the yellow-flowered varieties of honeysuckle are effective in treating heat conditions, perhaps the principal benefit of the plant today. The effect is cooling for menopausal hot flushes, fevers, sunstroke and urinary tract infections.

The oyle wherein its flowers have been infused and sunned, is good against cramps, convulsions of the sinuses, and palsies and other benumming cold griefe.
– Parkinson (1640)

Honeysuckle is also used for spasm in the respiratory system in such conditions as asthma, croup and bronchitis. It is antiseptic and effective against many micro-organisms, reinforcing its value for sore throats and respiratory problems.

A traditional Chinese formula, *shuang huang lian*, mixes honeysuckle, forsythia and skullcap for respiratory complaints. James Duke, doyen of American herbalists, rates honeysuckle second only to eucalyptus for sore throats.

We favour the flowers steeped in honey, though a tea of the dried flowers is also good, drunk often or poured into a hot bath.

Honeysuckle flowers infused in honey or glycerine

Pick **honeysuckle flowers** and buds and put them in a jar, then fill it up with **runny honey** or **vegetable glycerine**. Put the jar on a sunny windowsill or in another warm place and leave it for two weeks. You may need to push the flowers down into the liquid every few days to keep them covered, or they will go brown. Strain, bottle and label.
Dose: 1 teaspoonful as needed for sore throats, or 3 times a day.

Honeysuckle flowers in honey
- sore throats
- tonsillitis
- ‘flu
- colds
- hot flushes
- bronchitis

Hops

Humulus lupulus

A bitter sedative herb best known for its role in brewing and as an aid to sleep, hops also stimulate digestion and affect hormones.

The medicinal use of hops preceded that in brewing, in both cases via the female flower cones, the strobiles. Used mainly in the form of a hops pillow or tincture, hops' oestrogen-like compounds can reduce libido in men while increasing it in women.

Cannabaceae Hemp family

Description: A perennial climber, with separate male and female plants.

Habitat: Hedgerows, edges of woods.

Distribution: Found all over England and Wales, but scarcer in the north. Naturalised in parts of Scotland and Ireland.

Related species: There are several subspecies of hops, and two other species are found in Asia.

Parts used: Female fruiting cones (known as strobiles).

The manifold vertues of Hops do manifest argue the wholesomenesse of beere above ale; for the hops make it a physicall drinke to keepe the body in health, than an ordinary drinke for the quenching of our thirst.
– Gerard (1597)

Hops is considered by herbalists to be one of the most calming and relaxing herbs *known to mankind.*
– Dewey (1996)

While often believed to be an introduced plant, hops are native to the British Isles. They were named *lupulus* (‘small wolf’) by the Romans,

who wrongly thought hops strangled host plants on which they grew, like wolves strangled their prey. In Italy, hops were known as a food: the buds and tendrils still make an interesting soup, omelette and asparagus-like boiled vegetable. Hops are rather bitter to the taste, and we think John Evelyn's opinion (1699) – 'rather *Medicinal*, than fit for *Sallets*' – holds good today.

Hops were already cultivated for brewing in France and Germany by the eighth and ninth centuries. But ale held its place over beer in Britain until the seventeenth century; indeed, Henry VIII had banned the use of hops for a while. The Briton's ale was tradionally flavoured by plants such as ground ivy (old names alehoof and tunhoof), bog myrtle, yarrow and sage, but hops had a critical edge: all these other herbs did not preserve the brew for as long. As beer gained ground, and hops became a commercial cash-crop in the southeast and parts of the Midlands, the plant's medicinal virtues became obscured. But then another king, George III, gave the reputation of hops a boost. His insomnia was relieved by the suggestion of his prime minister, Lord Addington, to try a hops pillow. It succeeded, and the fashion for this effective sleep aid was set.

Hops are now used in some 60 commercial sedative formulas in Britain, and this is the 'official' use. This herb gently sedates without narcotic side effects, and soothes the smooth muscle of the stomach and bowel. It is thus a specific for nervous stomachs, IBS and Crohn's disease. It works to relax hyperactivity in children (using half doses of hops tincture). For sleeplessness, it combines well with wood betony, vervain, skullcap, red poppy, California poppy and passionflower. Avoid if you suffer from nervous depression.

The one fact everyone knows about hops is causing 'brewer's droop' in men; less familiar is the plant's role in increasing libido in women. Both reactions relate to hops' oestrogen-like compounds. Female hop pickers used to suffer disruptions in menstruation from constant contact with the plant. But used in balance with a woman's constitution hops are a good

treatment for hot flushes and in menopause. They also help control premature ejaculation in men.

As a bitter and a tonic, hops have an appetite-stimulating effect that can be beneficial in cases of anorexia. They calm and relieve the spasms of irritable bowel syndrome and increase urine flow (ask any beer drinker!).

Hops pillow

Pick **hops** strobiles (the flower cones) and dry them in a cool shady place. Make a small bag for the pillow out of **cloth**, leaving one end open – any size you like, but 20cm x 30cm works well. Fill the bag loosely with the dried hops (or add lavender if you wish) so that the

finished pillow will be 1 or 2cm thick, then stitch up the open end. Place this under your regular pillow to help with sleep.

The hops will gradually lose their volatile oils and therefore their effectiveness, so for best results replace the contents of your pillow every three months. Use hops that have been stored in the dark, in an airtight container. If your dried hops turn pinkish or reddish, their oils have been exhausted, and they should be discarded.

Hops pillow
• insomnia

Hops tincture

Pack dried **hops** cones into a jar, and fill it with **vodka**. Put the jar in a dark place for two weeks, shaking it every few days. Strain off the liquid, bottle and label.

Dose: 2–5ml a day. Take in the evening to help with sleep. For menopausal hot flushes, half a teaspoonful morning and evening. For lack of appetite or sluggish digestion, a few drops pre-meals.

Hops tincture
• hot flushes
• insomnia
• lack of appetite
• sluggish digestion

Cautions: Hops should not be taken if you suffer from depression. Taking hops can affect the menstrual cycle.

Horse chestnut

Aesculus hippocastanum

Familiar for its conkers, horse chestnut has been one of Britain's favourite ornamental trees for the last four centuries. It also has significant medicinal uses, particularly for supporting weakened veins, as in varicose veins, haemorrhoids and capillary fragility. It is used for two Bach Flower Essences and in commerical quantities for allopathic and homeopathic remedies for irregularities of the veins. It also has some surprising other uses.

Sapindaceae Horse chestnut family

Description: A tall tree, up to 40m, with palmate leaves in spring and huge candelabras of white–pink flowers in summer, followed by conkers in autumn.

Habitat: Hedgerows, parks and roadsides.

Distribution: It is widespread as a planted and naturalised species.

Related species: The red horse chestnut (*A. carnea*) is frequently planted in towns and parks, and is used as a flower essence. Horse chestnut is unrelated to sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*).

Parts used: Conkers, collected in autumn; leaves in spring.

A shapely tree, with glossy brown sticky buds in winter, lime green hand-shaped leaves in spring, then soft and frothy Folies-Bergère-like pink and white flowers in summer, and hard spherical auburn nuts, conkers, in autumn – no wonder the all-season beauty of horse chestnut was such a hit when the tree was introduced into England in the early 1600s.

At first a tree of kings and owners of great estates, it later came to belong to everybody as Britain's municipal tree of choice, planted ornamentally in every avenue and park, in every Chestnut Villas of every Victorian city.

Recent estimates of the national horse chestnut 'park' give a figure of over 400,000 trees. It was and is admired for its looks – the wood of horse chestnut is soft and spongy, poor for carpentry or building.

The tree's scientific and popular names may derive from its use in Turkey, one of the countries of origin of the first specimens to reach Western Europe. The Turks mixed flour from the conkers with oats to improve the breathing of broken-winded horses.

Other plant historians suggest that 'horse' is meant as a derogative comparison to the native and tasty sweet chestnut (which is unrelated botanically). Horse chestnut conkers do contain a complex bitter chemical, aescin (escin in US spelling), as the plant's active principle, and this is said to be toxic to humans in very large quantities.

Surprisingly varied uses have been found for the tree. The bark was used as a quinine substitute for malaria and other fevers, while the flower buds made an ersatz flavouring for beer. Conkers produce a good soapy lather for shampoo and to clean clothes, stop mould and repel clothes moths.

[Aescin, found in conkers] *… reduces leakage and is used in the treatment of oedema (lower leg swelling) and has proved to be as effective as compression stockings. It strengthens and tones the blood vessels and is becoming very important in the treatment of varicose veins and chronic venous insufficiency (CVI) … Haemorrhoids respond well too…*
– Howkins (2005)

And, little known today, conkers were used for explosives during the First World War. With other sources of acetone unavailable, British children collected 3,000 tons of conkers secretly in summer 1917 (their schools received a certificate). The research chemist seconded to the government's chestnuts plan, Chaim Weizman, then in Manchester, would become first president of Israel in 1948.

Other new 'explosive' chestnut issues include worries about a leaf miner moth damaging (but not killing) mature trees, and the charge that children are at risk while playing with conkers if they chew or eat them. Sadly, the game is now banned in some English schools, but it would need concerted force-feeding to reach toxic levels of aescin, and the bitter taste is already off-putting to children.

Use horse chestnut for…

Horse chestnut is a leading herbal treatment for weakened veins, including varicose veins, haemorrhoids, acne rosacea and chronic venous insufficiency (CVI). It has an unusual capacity to strengthen small blood vessel walls by reducing the size and number of the pores; it also works well on wrinkles by tightening the skin (an alternative to Botox, perhaps?), and for fluid retention or oedema.

Horse chestnut is taken both internally as a tincture and externally as a cream, oil or lotion. Internal use should be in small doses and under the supervision of a herbalist, in case of stomach irritation. Commercially, it is grown for horse chestnut seed extract (HCSE) and a homeopathic remedy. It also makes two Bach Flower Essences, chestnut bud and white chestnut.

Aesculus *has unique action on the vessels of the circulatory system. The herb appears to increase the elasticity and tone of the veins while decreasing vein permeability.*
– Hoffmann (2003)

Conker tincture

Collect the **conkers** as soon as they fall to the ground in early autumn. They will usually come out of their green spiky husks by themselves. While fresh, they are quite soft, but they soon harden and are much more troublesome to cut. Use a serrated knife and be careful in chopping them up, as they can skid out from under the knife blade.

Put the chopped conkers in a jar and pour in enough **vodka** to cover them. Leave in a dark cupboard for a month, shaking every few days. It is normal for the alcohol to extract a milky sediment from the seeds. Strain and bottle, or use to make the lotion below.

Internal use: 5 drops in water twice a day, or as recommended by your herbalist.

Conker tincture
- varicose veins
- thread veins
- fragile capillaries

Horse chestnut leaf oil

Pick **leaves** in spring before the flowers open. Chop them up and put them in a jar large enough to hold them. Fill the jar with **extra virgin olive oil**. Stir to remove any air bubbles, and top up with more oil if necessary. Put on a sunny windowsill to infuse for a month, then strain off the oil into a jug. Allow this to settle for half an hour. Carefully pour the oil into jars, leaving any watery sediment behind at the bottom of the jug. Apply directly to the skin or use to make the lotion below.

Horse chestnut leaf oil
- varicose veins
- thread veins
- fragile capillaries

Horse chestnut lotion

Chill equal amounts of **conker tincture, horse chestnut leaf oil** and **castor oil** in the fridge overnight, then blend until creamy. Bottle. Shake well before use, as it may separate on standing. Apply twice a day.

Horse chestnut lotion
• varicose veins
• thread veins
• fragile capillaries

Cautions: May cause digestive irritation when taken internally. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or taking blood-thinning medication, only take under professional supervision.

Horseradish

Armoracia rusticana

Horseradish root is hot and pungent, and the same qualities that make it the chosen accompaniment to roast beef also power its medicinal uses. It stimulates digestion, is an active eliminator of the waste products of fevers and colds, clears the sinuses and is warming for rheumatism and muscle aches.

Brassicaceae (Cruciferae) Cabbage family

Description: A perennial, which forms large patches. The leaves are dock-like, but bright green with parallel veins and wavy edges, and often full of holes from snails. In summer there may be trusses of white flowers.

Habitat: Along roadsides, on waste ground and in kitchen gardens.

Distribution: Widely naturalised except in the Scottish Highlands and western Ireland. Often a garden escape, it spreads by strong lateral roots, and is hard to remove once you have it.

Parts used: Roots.

… it is also a good remedy in strong bodies, both for the Cough, the Tissicke and other diseases of the lunges … the roote bruised and laid to the place grieved with the Sciatica-gout, joynt-ach, or the hard swellings of the spleene and liver, doth wonderfully helpe them all.
– Parkinson (1640)

Horseradish is this book's example of a hot, pungent and stimulating herb. Lacking native ginger or galangal, horseradish is a good British heating herb, although the mustards have similar virtues.

Horseradish is a bit of a show-off, a hot cabbage originating in southern Russia, with large, coarse, wavy-edged leaves that glisten in the rain. It has small and pretty white flowers, but its main claim to fame is its long and sturdy white tap root. And this hides its healing secrets.

The root is the part used medicinally, as it is to make the nation's customary sauce for roast beef. We are breaking our own rules about using roots for three reasons: horseradish is abundant, if not invasive; a few roots are all you need for a year's supply as a standby medicine; and it regenerates quickly from the least fragment of root left behind.

It was a medicine long before it became a condiment, but works in a parallel way in both uses. The outer layer of root is beige and inoffensive but as soon as you cut into the tissues beneath you are assailed by a hot and biting smell that makes your eyes water.

In small amounts the grated root, usually preserved in vinegar or a cream sauce, lifts the gastric enzymes into overdrive to break down the cell structure of cooked beef and prevent indigestion. Note that larger amounts can inflame the stomach lining in some people.

A mustard-like oil is being created here and released, stimulating digestive and other reactions. The mucous membranes in the mouth and

throat also react immediately, and the effect is wonderful for clearing blocked sinuses.

This vigorous response accounts for the use of horseradish in promoting elimination in ‘flus, fevers, coughs and catarrh. Be aware that it is an active process, with hot sweats and many tissues needed.

The cut root rubbed on stiff or aching joints and muscles will bring warmth to the skin. Rheumatic conditions can be eased using a poultice, but people with sensitive skin may react by blistering. The plant’s antiseptic and anti-microbial qualities offer relief for boils.

Do remember the root’s strength and volatility. It is not called ‘horse’, meaning ‘coarse’ or ‘rough’, for nothing. An earlier English name, red cole, is said to be because the fiery taste was like red-hot coals. John Pechey noted (1707): ‘horseradish provokes the appetite, but it hurts the head’.

Horseradish cough syrup

Grate a **horseradish root** into a bowl (outdoors if the fumes are strong). Whatever amount you make, cover this with **sugar**. Stir well, and leave for a few hours until a syrup develops. Strain off the liquid. If it is too fluid, heat until it reduces to the consistency you like. Pour into a bottle. It is strong, so dosage is no more than 3 tablespoons a day.

Horseradish syrup
- coughs
- colds
- fevers
- sinus congestion

Horseradish sauce

Chop **fresh horseradish root** and put in a blender with enough **cider vinegar** to blend. Store in the fridge. Use as a condiment, or chew a teaspoonful to clear blocked sinuses. The vinegar can be strained off after a week or two to use in the formula given on page 191.

Horseradish sauce
- sinus congestion
- sluggish digestion

Horsetail.

Horsetail

Equisetum arvense

Horsetail is one of the oldest of plants and a long-used folk remedy for the urinary system, cystitis, incontinence, bedwetting and prostate problems. It is the leading source of plant silica, and so helps where this mineral is deficient, as shown by symptoms like brittle nails, thin hair and allergies. Externally, it is good for rheumatism, chilblains and skin problems, and helps wounds, joints and sprains to heal.

Equisetaceae Horsetail family

Description: A leafless non-flowering perennial with hollow, jointed stems, growing up to 40cm tall. It looks like a miniature Christmas tree, and has spreading green teeth on the stem sheath.

Habitat: Roadsides, gardens and waste ground.

Distribution: Throughout the British Isles, and widespread in Europe, Asia and North America.

Related species: Two other of the nine species found in the British Isles have a traditional medicinal use: wood horsetail (*E. sylvaticum*), similar to field horsetail but more delicate and drooping at the tip; and rough horsetail (*E. hyemale*), which has no branches. The other species are not used for medicine.

Parts used: Above-ground parts harvested in summer.

When we say horsetail is old we do really mean old: relatives of our 20–40cm or more common plant grew 20–40 metres tall and were the forest trees of the Carboniferous age, roughly 270–370 million years ago. You can see fossilised traces of proto-horsetail in lumps of domestic coal today, and apart from size the prehistoric and modern look uncannily alike.

The name *equisetum* refers to ‘horse’ and ‘bristle’, giving rise to the common English name. To the Romans it was ‘hair of the earth’.

Horsetail is now esteemed as the main source of silica in the plant world. In effect little more than a skeleton of silica, it contains 30% or more of this element, depending on the soil; the burnt ash has over 80% silica.

Such a rich natural source of silica was recognised long ago. Old names of horsetail include pewterwort, shave-grass and bottlebrush, which hint at its ability to scour but not damage pewter, and safely polish wood and glass. The plant was sold in London streets up to the eighteenth century for such purposes. It is said that powdered horsetail ash mixed with water is still the best silver cleaner.

Another unique quality of the plant is that it doesn’t have leaves or flowers as such, and spreads by means of spores, like a fern. In spring, fertile stems grow up from deep underground rhizomes. These stems are bare with conelike heads full of spores – ‘drumsticks poking out of the ground’, says one author. Another writer thinks it ‘resembles moth-eaten asparagus’. These softish stems die back and are replaced in summer by segmented, stiff and infertile stems with narrow leaves sprouting from nodes, something like pine needles on a bamboo.

While the spore stems can be eaten, and were favoured by the Romans as a tonic salad, the silica-rich summer stems are better used for cleaning your pots and for their herbal qualities.

Is horsetail toxic?

You may have read that horsetail is toxic or that it can irritate the digestive tract.

Horsetail is toxic to livestock if they eat large quantities of it. With horses, a thiamine (vitamin B1) deficiency is caused when they eat hay contaminated with horsetail. Thiaminase, which causes this, is destroyed by heat, so is not present in a horsetail tea or syrup.

Horsetails do contain alkaloids, including palustrine, but there don't seem to be any records of toxicity in humans. We've had no experience of horsetail causing irritation when using it long-term as a tea in combination with other herbs.

It seems that horsetail would be more likely to irritate if it is taken in capsules as a powdered herb where the non-soluble silica is ingested, and yet many herbalists use horsetail in capsule form with good results. Water extracts of horsetail are unlikely to cause irritation.

To be safe: do not eat large quantities of horsetail and avoid the species of horsetail not normally used medicinally.

A young field horsetail (*E. arvense*) collects the early morning dew. Note the green joints, an identifying characteristic.

Use horsetail for…

A key virtue of horsetail is that its silica is water-soluble, meaning that it can be readily transported around the body in solution form. Taken as a tea or syrup, it reaches your nails and joints, hair and skin; externally it makes a good poultice and hair rinse, or can be added to the bath or body lotion.

Horsetail may help if you have weak or brittle nails, thin hair with split ends, chronic cystitis or bladder irritation, multiple allergies, or weak joints and connective tissue.

Horsetail can, in certain cases, work wonders in rebuilding joints and other connective tissues.

One case of horsetail's value was told by a massage therapist who thought she might have to give up her work on account of pain and weakness of the wrist joint. Taking horsetail corrected this, and indeed also led to her fingernails growing much faster. She had to cut them more often to remain a smooth operator!

There is a tradition of horsetail being used to strengthen bones and teeth, and it is often found in formulae for osteoporosis and bone fractures. It helps in the healing process after surgery.

Horsetail seems to work by strengthening the channels in the body, including the arteries and veins, and assists the free passage of fluids. One of its common names, bottle brush, could refer to its shape but could as easily relate to this clearing of channels.

Horsetail is mildly diuretic, meaning it can clear the kidneys without exhausting them. It is useful in teas for cystitis, incontinence and other bladder issues, and can help with the problems associated with prostate enlargement.

It is also known as a wound herb, releasing pus and damaged cells from infected wounds. Another way it works on wounds is to slow the bleeding.

Harvesting horsetail

Pick horsetail in early summer, cutting the plant several inches above the ground so that it can grow back. For teas, dry it quickly, so that the plants don't turn brown. Crushing the plants lightly with a rolling pin helps the moisture escape. When dry, cut up into short pieces.

Cystitis tea blend

Combine roughly equal parts by volume of dried **horsetail** and **couchgrass**, and whichever you have on hand of the following: **bilberry leaves, yarrow** or **pellitory of the wall**.

Use a rounded teaspoonful of the mixture per mug of boiling water in a teapot, and leave to brew for 10 minutes.

Dose: Drink a cupful every two hours for acute cystitis, and continue with three cups a day for a while until you are completely over the cystitis.

Horsetail tea

Add **a rounded teaspoonful of dried horsetail** and **half a teaspoonful of sugar** to **2 cups of water** in a small saucepan. Bring to the boil, turn down the heat and simmer gently, uncovered, until the liquid has reduced by about half.

Dose: Drink a cup occasionally to keep your skin, nails and hair strong and healthy.

Make triple strength and add a cupful to hot baths and foot baths to help heal sprains and other injuries. It is remarkably effective.

Horsetail tea
- cystitis
- incontinence
- bedwetting
- weak nails
- skin problems
- brittle hair
- benign prostate enlargement

Horsetail bath
- rheumatic pains
- skin problems
- chilblains
- sprains

Horsetail syrup

This recipe keeps well, is convenient to take, and tastes good.

A couple of handfuls of fresh horsetail (about 50g)
500ml water
100g sugar

Place the ingredients together in a pan, boil, then reduce heat and simmer for half an hour until the horsetail turns dark green and becomes soft. Strain off the liquid and return it to the pan with an additional 150g

sugar. Boil for 5 minutes, allow to cool, then bottle. Makes about 400ml syrup.

Dose: Take one teaspoonful a day for two or three weeks, then take a break for a week before resuming if needed.

Horsetail syrup
- incontinence
- bedwetting
- weak nails
- thin or brittle hair
- chronic cystitis
- benign prostate enlargement

… it doth perfectly cure wounds, yea, although the sinues be cut asunder.
– Galen (1st century AD)

An excellent remedy, internally and externally, for the whole kidney and bladder system.
– Treben (1980)

Horsetail

Lime, Linden

Tilia spp.

The perfect remedy for stress, tension and overwork, lime blossom helps us relax and sleep well. It soothes irritation, boosts the immune system and protects the heart by reducing cholesterol levels and relaxing the arteries.

Linden tea is widely enjoyed in France where it is drunk as a daily beverage for its pleasant honey-like taste and its health benefits. It is also wonderful for children.

Tiliaceae Lime family

Description: Tall, elegant trees that bear deciduous, heart-shaped leaves and fragrant flowers in summer.

Habitat: Woods, hedgerows, parks and gardens.

Distribution: Common lime is widespread, though often planted. Small-leaved lime is found in much of England and Wales, while large-leaved lime is most common on the

English–Welsh borders.

Species: Common lime (*Tilia x europaea*) is the hybrid of the two species native to the British Isles, small-leaved lime (*T. cordata*) and large-leaved lime (*T. platyphyllos*). Any of these three can be used.

Parts used: Flowers, picked when the first flowers in each bunch have opened in summer.

There is nothing quite like walking under lime trees when they are in full flower in early summer, drowsily fragrant and loudly humming with the buzz of hundreds of honeybees. Bees adore lime blossom, and make a flavoursome honey from it that retains the calming effects of the flowers.

Linden's heady scent does have an uplifting effect on consciousness, and in folklore it was said that if you fell asleep under a lime tree you could wake up in fairyland. More practically, if you park your car under one in high summer, it will be covered with sticky droppings of honeydew from greenfly that live on the leaves.

The name lime can be confusing, as many of us think of lime fruit, a relative of the lemon. All that links the two is the colour, which is similar in the leaves of linden trees and the citrus fruit. There is also no connection with limestone.

The blossom season is short and can easily be missed, especially if the weather is bad.

Use lime or linden for…

Medicinally, lime blossom is best known as a calming, relaxing remedy. It can be used to treat high blood pressure, and arteriosclerosis, particularly where stress and anxiety are major factors. It is a circulatory relaxant, working to destress the arterial walls.

Relieving tension as it does, linden encourages a restful relaxing sleep, helping you wake refreshed and clear-headed. It was recommended as a sedative on the home front during the Second World War.

The tea, drunk hot, promotes sweating. This can be used to ‘break a fever’, with sweating being the body’s natural way of preventing a fever from burning too hot, while also helping eliminate toxins through the skin and clearing them through the urine. If the linden infusion is drunk cool, it is cooling to the body and useful for treating the hot flushes associated with menopause. Cold linden tea makes a delightful light summer drink on a hot day.

The beautifully and gently scented flowers are a testament to the best in plant remedies: they are symptomatically useful, pleasant to take and at the same time appear to help the body’s resistance to infection.
– Barker (2001)

Linden tea is very popular in France and its sweet taste appeals to children. This helps linden to become one of the major children’s remedies in herbal medicine.
– Conway (2001)

Linden is also warming and relaxing to the digestive sytem. It can help whenever tension goes to the digestive tract, either through eating on the run or through general anxiety. Related tension conditions, like cramps, colic and period pains, can also be alleviated.

Being a gentle remedy with a pleasant taste, linden is particularly good for treating children. It quietly calms an overactive or fractious child, soothing and relaxing them. It is effective when they have nervous digestion or trouble sleeping, and can also be used for coughs and colds and ’flu, alone or with elderflower.

Externally, the tea can be rubbed into the skin to give relief in inflamed conditions such as boils, rashes, bites, scalds and burns, or used for sore eyes. It is also soothing in a bath or for massage.

Homeopathically, linden has much the same uses as the herb, being specific for children’s toothache and women’s pelvic inflammation. The inner bark of linden is known as bast (bass in the United States, giving basswood, another name for the tree). Bast can be made into a tea that is soothing for diarrhoea.

Linden tea

Use the new flowers and unopened buds, with their stalk and leaf sheath. Pick on a dry sunny day, and avoid any blossoms with a blackish mildew growing on them. The lime blossom season is very short, with the blossoms only at their best for about a week, so if the weather is wet during this time you are better off tincturing the blossom than drying it.

Dry the flowers out of the sun until they are crispy. Once dry, you can remove the larger stalks and store the blossom in paper bags or jars in a cool dark place. If exposed to light, lime blossom will soon deteriorate. If it turns a pinkish colour, it should be discarded.

Use a heaped teaspoonful of **dried blossom** per cup of **boiling water** in a teapot, and infuse for about 5 minutes. This is a good evening drink as it will relax without being too sedative. Drink a cupful one to three times a day for anxiety or restlessness. For colds or fevers, drink small amounts of the hot tea throughout the day to soothe, clear catarrh and promote perspiration. Drink cold for hot flushes.

Hot linden tea
- nervous tension
- anxiety
- stress
- high blood pressure
- colds
- fevers and 'flu
- insomnia
- tension headache
- migraine

Cold linden tea
- hot flushes

Linden tincture

Fill a jar with the **freshly picked blossom**, and top it up with **vodka**. Leave it in a cupboard for two weeks, shaking every few days. Strain, bottle and label.

Dose: Half a teaspoonful 2 or 3 times a day.

Linden tincture
- nervous tension

- anxiety
- stress
- high blood pressure
- insomnia

Small-leaved lime, Bardney Woods, Lincolnshire, June

Lycium

Lycium barbarum, L. chinense

Marketed as goji berry, lycium has a reputation as an exotic health food or ‘superfruit’. It is actually a naturalised hedgerow plant in southern Britain, known as the Duke of Argyll’s tea plant, Chinese wolfberry, box thorn or matrimony vine.

The berries make a rejuvenating tonic with a wide range of claimed benefits including improving eyesight and helping to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy in cancer patients.

Solanaceae Nightshade family

Description: An arching, floppy shrub with small, stiff leaves and purple flowers, followed by scarlet berries in autumn.

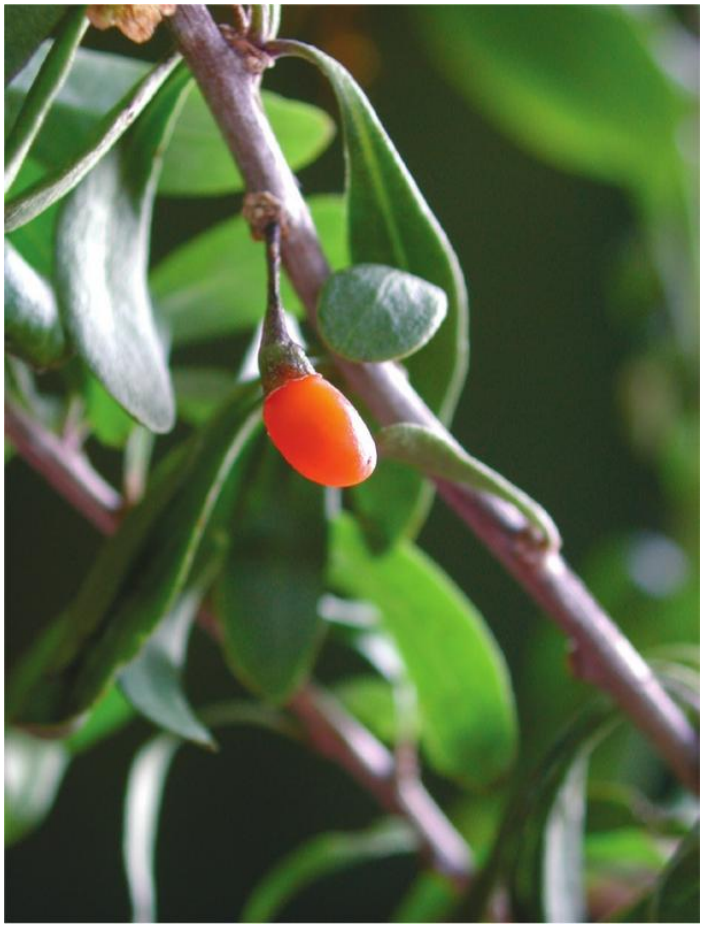
Habitat: Hedgerows and near the seashore.

Distribution: Naturalised in the south and midlands of England, less frequent in Scotland, Wales and Ireland (usually coastal). Found in most European countries. Native to Asia and possibly to eastern Europe.

Related species: *Lycium chinense* (Chinese tea plant) and *L. barbarum* (Duke of Argyll’s tea plant) are very similar and may be used interchangeably. There are around

80 other species in the genus, found in the Americas, Eurasia and Africa.

Parts used: Berries gathered in autumn.



Lycium originates in China and has been part of Chinese medicine for millennia. Its undoubted health benefits have become something of a fad in the West in the last decade or so.

In Chinese cuisine worldwide young leaves and seedlings of lycium are used for soup, and the bark of the root medicinally for malaria and high blood pressure. However, it is the tasty orange– red berries, known as *gou qi zi* (or goji), that are prized.

In Chinese terms, the berries nourish and tonify the liver and kidney meridians, and address blood and *yin* deficiency. In practice this means the berries are useful for conditions as varied as dryness, sore back and

legs, weak muscles and ligaments, impotence, dizziness and vision problems.

What may be surprising is that this plant has actually been a naturalised plant in Britain since the 1730s. The story goes that the third Duke of Argyll, Archibald Campbell (1682–1761), an avid plant collector, was sent a true tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, and a lycium, but the labels were switched in the ship's hold. The name Duke of Argyll's tea plant (or tea tree) for lycium stuck and was kept even once the mistake was recognised. Other names lycium has attracted include Chinese wolfberry, box thorn and matrimony vine.

Use lycium for…

Lycium is both a food and a medicine, and the berries can be eaten daily, dried if fresh isn’t available, with claimed improvement in strength,

eyesight and male sexual performance. They are safe even in quantity, with no reported safety issues, except when somebody has problems with nightshade family plants, such as potato or tomato.

The fresh berry is tasty and somewhat astringent, resembling a small persimmon, and when dried is like a sweet red raisin. We eat dried berries on cereal or hot with rice; in China lycium tea, coffee, wine and beer are all made.

There has been considerable recent hype about the ‘superfood’ benefits of lycium taken as a juice, but we make no comment here on the claims for commercial goji products. Full-scale research is lacking, and we base our comments on our own experience and that of herbalists whose opinion we respect.

One benefit of lycium that is generally accepted is to promote a healthy gut flora, while lowering ‘bad’ LDL and VLDL cholesterol levels in the bloodstream. The berries serve to stabilise the capillaries, veins and arteries throughout the body. They work on thread and varicose veins, and fragile capillaries that bleed under the skin. They also help to reduce narrowing of the arteries (atherosclerosis), thereby benefiting cold hands and feet.

This effect of lycium berries on capillaries is one reason they are good for the eyes; they also contain high levels of lutein and other carotenoids needed by the retina and for healthy eye functioning.

Regular use of lycium berries can help improve night vision, reduces excessive watering of the eyes and delays the onset of cataracts and glaucoma. The berries also stimulate lubrication of dry, red or painful eyes, and prevent macular degeneration.

There are, further, indications that the berries enhance the beneficial effects of chemotherapy and radiation while also protecting cancer patients against the reduced white blood cell count that will often accompany these treatments. The berries support the liver against the side effects of medication and help relieve cachexia (malnutrition and other

metabolic disturbances linked with cancer and AIDS). This liver protection also extends to exposure to toxic chemicals.

In addition, the berries, with plentiful antioxidants and high levels of vitamin C, reduce inflammation, enhance the immune function and slow down tumour growth.

These are substantial and substantiated benefits for any herb, especially one that is now a British hedgerow plant. Lycium has also attracted official attention. It was specifically named in 2003 by a government department looking at protecting traditional hedgerows (the locations named were in maritime Suffolk and Norfolk). Then, in mid-2007, goji products were officially approved for sale as a food in the UK after demonstrating they had a proven history of use, mainly in the UK Chinese population, for many years.

[Lycium fruit and leaf] *makes one feel happy and vigorous.*
– Lu Ji, *Shi Shu*, an ancient Chinese text

[do not eat lycium] *when travelling thousands of miles from home*
– Chinese saying, referring to sexual potency of lycium

In China it has long been claimed that lycium improves sexual performance, mainly in older men. Research has found that regular doses of the berries can raise testosterone levels when these are deficient. Many older men have this problem, so to this extent lycium may reduce impotence and can be seen as aphrodisiac.

Allied to the last use, lycium is renowned as anti-ageing, one Chinese name being ‘drive-away-old-age-berries’. This is good news, but marketing claims that one man, Li Qing Yen, lived for 252 years (1678–1930) because he took daily lycium are surely excessive.

Our descriptions of lycium’s many and varied ‘virtues’, in the old herbal phrase, should not cloud the fact that it is an effective general energy-restoring tonic treatment, which can be safely taken on a long-term basis.

For example, a serving of 100g of dried berries has been estimated to supply 100% of daily needs of iron and riboflavin (vitamin B2), and nearly all the selenium and calcium. It is reasonably strong in vitamin C but exceptionally rich in polysaccharides and zeaxanthin.

Lycium in Lincolnshire: a sprawling hedge in the village of Nettleton, June

Goji is not a cheap commercial product, but it need not be expensive to use if you harvest from a local hedgerow or plant your own lycium hedge. It is easy to grow from seed, but note that snails adore it and will devour seedlings. Once established, it is vigorous (it is used as a dune-fixer), and needs strong springtime pruning. This effort could repay you with a mass of beautiful purple flowers and brilliant scarlet berries later.

Both the berries and leaves of lycium can be eaten

Lycium is interesting, with both ancient and very modern health applications. Goji berries and juice are a fashion of the day, with China exporting US $120m of these products in 2004. But even if this commercial fad declines, lycium is already a British hedgerow plant, at present too little known but with much to commend it.

Harvesting lycium berries

The berries are picked in the autumn when they are ripe. These scarlet, glossy fruits are enjoyed by a variety of wildlife, so you will have some competition. The best ones are often found where bramble and nettle help protect them, but they have no thorns themselves. They can be eaten fresh and have an unusual flavour, similar to persimmon with perhaps a hint of red bell pepper.

Lycium berry tincture

Put your fresh **lycium berries** in a blender with enough **vodka** to cover them, and blend briefly. Pour into a jar and leave in a cool dark place for a couple of days, then strain off the liquid. Bottle and label.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful 2 to 3 times a day.

Lycium berry tincture

- eyesight
- fragile capillaries
- varicose veins
- thread veins
- high cholesterol
- aphrodisiac
- fertility

In close-up, the elegant pink and mauve-streaked flowers of common mallow hint at its family connection to the hibiscus and suggest an Art Nouveau lampshade. If the leaves and stems didn’t go so straggly later in the year, it would be a stunning garden plant.

Mallow

Malva sylvestris

The common mallow has suffered by comparison with its more famous cousin, the marsh mallow, the only member of the family to be an ‘official’ herb. But marsh mallow is rare as a wild plant and moreover is dug up for its root, so for the many soothing qualities of mallow, internal and external, the common form offers a highly effective alternative.

Malvaceae Mallow family

Description: A tall or sprawling perennial growing to 1m with pinkish-purple flowers and ivy-shaped leaves.

Habitat: Hedgerows, bare ground.

Distribution: Common throughout the British Isles except in Scotland and Ireland. Found in Europe and northern Africa.

Related species: Musk mallow (*M. moschata*) and dwarf or low mallow (*M. neglecta*) are also quite common. Marsh mallow (*Althaea officinalis*) is rare, and now only found in the British Isles in southern and eastern coastal areas.

Parts used: Leaves and flowers collected in summer.

The latest official list of British herbs, the *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia* 1996, describes only one mallow, the marsh mallow (*Althaea officinalis*), which has become rare in the wild in the British Isles. For commercial use it is now imported from Eastern Europe. The confection ‘marshmallow’ was once cooked from the roots of this plant but has long since ceased to be made of anything herbal.

Its abundantly found cousin, the common, high or blue mallow (*Malva sylvestris*), has many of the same benefits, so, in the spirit of responsible hedgerow medicine, we recommend its use.

The common mallow does have its advocates, among them Maria Treben in twentieth-century Austria and the journalist and traveller William Cobbett in early nineteenth-century England. Cobbett offers a remarkable encomium of wild mallows, having learned of their value from a French military captive, a follower of Napoleon, in Long Island, New York.

The English farrier, A. Lawson, writing after Cobbett, quotes his own experience of using boiled mallow leaves to treat the badly swollen arm of a nearby farmer and to close a deep wound in a pig that had been gored by a cow's horn. Lawson quotes Cobbett with approval:

This weed is perhaps amongst the most valuable of plants that ever grew. Its leaves stewed, and applied wet, will cure, and almost instantly cure, any cut or bruise or wound of any sort.… And its operation is in all cases so quick that it can hardly be believed.

For her part, Treben writes of making up a mallow gargle to treat a man with cancer of the larynx. She used the residue of the mallow mixture, mixed with barley flour, as an overnight poultice for the man's throat. Within two weeks, he was well enough to consider a return to his profession of teaching. The man's medical specialist said of Treben, 'this woman deserves a gold medal!'

Now, a person must be almost criminally careless not to make a provision of this herb.… If the use of this weed were generally adopted, the art and mystery of healing wounds, and of curing sprains, swellings and other external maladies, would very quickly be reduced to an unprofitable trade.
– Cobbett (c1820s)

Mallow from *Hortus Floridus* (1614–16), by Crispijn van de Passe

At an earlier date, Nicholas Culpeper had written movingly of saving his son from ‘inside plague’ by using a mallow liquor [see quote]. In the sixteenth century and later, mallow had a reputation as *omnimorbia*, literally a cure-all. This could have because mallow is laxative, and this was thought to rid the body of all disease.

Use mallow for…

While modern-day mallow users would scarcely claim it as a cure-all, they would also say it doesn’t merit official oblivion. Mallow does have solid virtues, and most of these arise from its high mucilage content: common mallow flowers have around 10% mucilage and the leaves 7%.

Indeed, all thousand or so members of the *Malva* family worldwide possess this gelatinous substance, including okra and hibiscus.

Mucilage, a word that is cognate with mucus, is extremely soothing to any inflamed part of the body, both outside and within. This includes dry coughs, colds, gastrointestinal upsets, stomach ulcers and urinary tract infections. As one herbalist notes, when you cannot even swallow water, you can take a mallow tea. Further, it is very safe, in any quantity.

Maria Treben advocates mallow foot and hand baths for treating swellings following bone fractures.

One thing to watch out for in wild-gathering mallow is that its low-growing crinkly leaves tend to accumulate heavy metals from vehicle exhausts and also attract a mallow rust and various insect eggs. So it is a good idea to do your picking well away from busy roads and examine carefully any leaves and flowers you collect.

Mallow is sometimes eaten as a soup, though it is rather ‘gloupy’, and the unripe seed heads make a slightly astringent addition to salads. These seed capsules have long been known as ‘cheeses’, but because of the circular shape rather than the taste. The flowers were chewed to relieve toothache.

Always with mallow, though, you come back to its unrivalled soothing benefits. But do remember that large doses can be laxative as well as purgative! Cicero (106–43 BC) angrily reports being accidentally purged by eating a stew of mallow mixed with beet – and he laments that he had already forgone the oysters in an effort to be good.

You may remember, that not long since there was a raging disease called the bloody-flux; the college of physicians not knowing what to make of it, called it the plague of the guts, for their wits were at Ne plus ultra *about it.*
My son was taken with the same disease, and the excoriation of his bowels was exceeding great; myself being in the country, was sent for up; the only thing I gave him, was Mallows bruised and boiled both in milk and drink; in two days (the blessing of God being upon it) it cured him.
And I here, to shew my thankfulness to God, in communicating it to his creatures, leave it to posterity.
– Culpeper (1653)

Harvesting mallow

Pick the leaves before the plant flowers or whenever they are a bright healthy green. They are best used fresh, although they can be dried.

Pick the flowers and flower buds in summer. They can be used fresh or dried by spreading them out on a sheet of paper in a cool airy place. Mallow flowers turn from pinkish purple to blue as they dry. They can be used on their own as a soothing tea, and make a pretty addition to other herbal tea blends.

Mallow poultice

Chop or chew a fresh mallow leaf and apply to swellings, wounds and cuts. The poultice can be held in place using a sticking plaster or bandage for as long as it is needed. It reduces inflammation as it soothes and heals, so is good for insect bites, boils and abscesses.

Mallow poultice
• swellings

• insect bites
• boils & abscesses
• cuts

Mallow tea

Use a rounded teaspoonful of the **dried or fresh flowers** or a couple of **fresh leaves** per mugful of boiling water. Allow to infuse for about 5 minutes, then strain.

Dose: Drink a mugful 3 times a day as needed to soothe the digestion, or coughs and sore throats.

Mallow tea
• indigestion
• IBS
• dry, sore throat
• dry cough
• mild constipation

Mallow salad

Mallow leaves and petals make a mild and pleasant addition to a leafy green salad, and make it warmer and more soothing to the digestion.

Meadowsweet

Filipendula ulmaria

The story of meadowsweet, queen of the meadow, links mead, Cuchulainn, Queen Elizabeth I and the invention of aspirin.

This is the number one herb for treating stomach acid problems, while also benefiting the joints and urinary system. Meadowsweet is effective for fevers and 'flu, diarrhoea, headaches and pain relief generally. It well earns its name 'herbal aspirin'.

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: A perennial of up to 1 or 1.5 metres tall, with serrated leaves, silvery beneath, and fragrant masses of creamy-white flowers in high summer.

Habitat: Marshes, streams, ditches and moist woodland.

Distribution: Widespread throughout the British Isles.

Related species: There are ten species in the genus worldwide. The dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*) is a related species of chalk and limestone areas.

Parts used: Flowering tops; less often, leaves and roots.

A popular wild plant, fortunately more common now there is less spraying on field edges and hedgerows, meadowsweet has some delightful country names, including queen or lady of the meadow, maid of the mead, bridewort and sweet or new mown hay. But plant historians suggest the origin of the common name is more to do with mead the honey drink than meadows as such. Meadsweet is another old name, and

William Turner's herbal (1568) has 'medewurte', a term also used by Chaucer two centuries earlier.

The creamy billows of meadowsweet's flowers have indeed been used for centuries as a flavouring for mead, wine, beer and syrups, and still make a good choice.

Everybody says the smell is full of summer echoes, but some do find it rather overpowering. Matthew is one of these, and says: 'I owe a lifelong debt to meadowsweet as this was the very first long word I uttered. At about three years old, according to my mother, when I was saying almost nothing else, out pops this word I'd heard on family walks in the Trent marshes. These days I'm more likely to swear, though, as I get hayfever if I'm too close to the flowers.'

In hedgerow medicine terms, the plant gives much more than it takes. A sacred herb of the Druids, meadowsweet was well known to Celtic communities as a malaria and fever treatment. The legendary hero Cuchulainn was given it to calm his fits of rage and fevers, as recalled in the plant's Gaelic name, 'belt of Cuchulainn'.

Use meadowsweet for…

The flowers and tops yield a beneficial herb tea or tincture that is particularly good for an upset stomach and diarrhoea, and the whole plant was a traditional strewing herb of medieval and Tudor times. Charles I's herbalist, John Parkinson, wrote in 1640:

because both flowers and herbes are of so pleasing a sweete sent, many doe much delight therein, to have it layd in their Chambers, Parlars, &c. and Queene Elizabeth *of famous memory, did more desire it then any other sweet herbe to strew her Chambers withall.*

Willow has a longer record of use in pain relief, with Hippocrates, 'the father of medicine', in the fifth century BC, using powdered willow bark and leaves to control headache and pain generally. But it was research on meadowsweet that led to chemical breakthroughs in the nineteenth century.

These included the identifying of salicylic acid, and culminated in the synthesis and manufacture of it as aspirin. The drug company Bayer patented the name in 1899, basing it on the old Latin name for meadowsweet, *Spiraea*.

Frothy, creamy flowers, erect reddish stalks, a ditch location: typical meadowsweet in high summer

Cautions: If you are allergic to aspirin you may have a similar reaction to meadowsweet.

We now know that, like willow, meadowsweet contains natural salicylate salts. Aspirin itself is synthesised acetylsalicylic acid, which in concentration the stomach finds burning. This means pure aspirin can cause stomach pain and ulcers, but meadowsweet's balanced combination of organic compounds is soothing for heartburn and hyperacidity, as well as ulcers.

… the plant exerts the same effects and is prescribed for the same complaints [as aspirin], *but with the bonus of being a natural remedy.*
– Palaiseul (1973)

… an excellent ‘herbal aspirin’.
– Cech (2000)

This is not to decry aspirin, for like meadowsweet it offers a wonderful combination of pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory benefits. The plant, however, has a broader range of activity, including gentle astringency. Instead of damaging the stomach, it soothes upset tummies and is a good remedy for children’s diarrhoea.

In terms of acid indigestion, reducing the acid levels in the stomach can assist in lowering such levels in the body overall. This might explain why meadowsweet is so effective in treating joint problems associated with acidity.

It has been used to good effect in dispelling uric and oxalic acid, thereby relieving some of the pain of articular rheumatism and gout. A stronger infusion is taken in such cases. Externally, cloths soaked in meadowsweet tea can also be applied to sore joints and bring extra relief; another soothing external use is for mouth ulcers and bleeding gums.

One other area of benefit is in the positive effect of the plant’s salicylates for treating cystitis and urethritis, as well as breaking down kidney stones and gravel. The strong capacity of the plant to eliminate toxins and uric acid supports this action.

Meadowsweet always brings its analgesic and soothing properties to even the more vigorous aspects of its healing range, and as a relaxant it stops spasm and promotes restorative sleep. And even if you are feeling well, if you have the tea to hand, all you have to do is smell it, and you’ll feel summer’s heat and brightness return.

Harvesting meadowsweet

Pick **meadowsweet flowers** and **leaves** on a dry sunny day. Spread them on paper or a screen outside for a while to let all the little black beetles escape, then dry indoors. Once dry, crumble or cut into smaller pieces and store in brown paper bags or in jars, in a cool dark place.

Meadowsweet tea

Use a rounded teaspoonful of the **dried meadowsweet** per mug of **boiling water**, and allow to infuse for 5 minutes. It's best made in a teapot or covered mug to keep the aroma in. Drink a cup before meals if you suffer from acid indigestion or stomach problems, or one to three cups a day for arthritic and rheumatic aches and pains.

Meadowsweet tea

- indigestion
- heartburn
- excess stomach acid
- gastritis
- hiatus hernia
- stomach ulcer
- arthritis
- rheumatism

Meadowsweet glycerite

Pick **meadowsweet flowers** on a dry sunny day. Spread them on a cloth outside and let any insects escape, then pack the flowers into a jar large enough to hold them. Make a mix of 60% **vegetable glycerine** with 40% **water** (ie for 100ml, you would use 60ml glycerine and 40ml water), and pour this mixture onto the meadowsweet until the jar is full. Stir to release any trapped air bubbles and top up if necessary.

Put the jar on a sunny windowsill, pushing the flowers back under the liquid every few days if necessary, or employ a plastic 'preserving plunger' used in jam-making to keep it down. It's a good idea to put a saucer under your jar, as sometimes the glycerine will ooze out at the top. After two weeks, strain off the liquid, bottle and label it.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful three times a day for stomach problems. A teaspoonful can also just be taken just when it's needed for heartburn and indigestion, with a second dose after an hour if necessary.

Meadowsweet glycerite

- indigestion
- heartburn
- excess stomach acid
- gastritis

• hiatus hernia
• stomach ulcer
• arthritis
• rheumatism

Meadowsweet electuary

For a particularly irritated digestive tract, mix **slippery elm powder** into your **meadowsweet glycerite** to make a runny paste or electuary.
Dose: 1 teaspoonful three times a day as needed.

Meadowsweet electuary
• heartburn
• diverticulitis
• bowel inflammation

Meadowsweet ghee

This is a lovely warming, pain-relieving rub, which goes on smoothly and smells of summer sweetness. To make the ghee, melt a packet of **butter** in a small saucepan. Simmer for about 20 minutes, skim off and discard the foam on top, then slowly pour the clear golden liquid into a clean saucepan leaving behind the whitish residue at the bottom. Put 5 or 6 heads of **meadowsweet flowers** in the ghee and heat gently for about 10 minutes. Strain and pour into jars to set.

Meadowsweet ghee
• muscle aches & pains
• sciatica
• backache
• painful joints
• arthritis

Mint

Mentha spp.

Mint is wonderful for the digestion, as a tea, in food and medicinally. It also relieves nausea, spasms and gas, and offers the benefits of being both warming and cooling to the body.

Lamiaceae (Labiatae) Deadnettle family

Description: Aromatic perennials with dense whorls of lilac flowers.

Habitat: Most species prefer stream sides and damp places in woods or grassland.

Distribution: Water mint is the most common species, found virtually all over the British Isles.

Species: Several species are found in the wild in Britain, notably water mint (*Mentha aquatica*), corn or field mint (*M. arvensis*), pennyroyal (*M. pulegium*), spearmint (*M. spicata*) and round-leaved mint (*M. suaveolens*). They will hybridise easily with each other and with garden mints. Any of them can be used, but avoid pennyroyal if you are pregnant.

Parts used: Leaves and flowers, harvested in spring and summer.

A hot, hazy, sultry afternoon in high summer, under a high blue sky with scudding white clouds. We are visiting a wet part of the wood behind our house. Water mint and peppermint abound, at their washed-out purple

peak, along with the almost identical colours of hemp agrimony and the commoner thistles.

This is an example of collective taking of turns as plants of similar colour ripen together. The pale purple flowers are active this week along with attendant pollinators. Butterflies, bees, flies and smaller insects are pulled to the mints, and red admirals, peacocks, meadow browns, commas and whites feast on the flowers. Photographing them is another matter, but eventually a meadow brown stays still.

It's one of those days when hedgerow medicine is at its most pleasant and mellow, with the sweet tang of bruised mint and lazy buzz of insects giving us a feeling we have taken to calling content-mint.

But what do we mean by 'mint'? There are at least two dozen different species and hundreds of cultivars, if you add the wild and garden mints together. Moreover, the mints hybridise willingly and produce subtle new forms. As a ninth-century treatise on plants put it, 'if one were to enumerate completely all the virtues, varieties and names of mint, one would be able to say how many fish are swimming in the Red Sea…'

We must simplify, and will focus on the water mint (*Mentha aquatica*) as the commonest wild form in Britain. This has a mild medicinal action. Spearmint and corn mint are similar hedgerow mints.

What we usually mean by 'mint' is probably peppermint (*M. piperita*), which has flourished in British gardens and in the wild since the seventeenth century. It is considered to be a hybrid of watermint and spearmint, but has a stronger proportion of aromatic oils than either. These oils, particularly menthol, account for the greater 'mintiness' of peppermint and for its commercial use.

Modern commercial uses of mint build on older and proven herbal applications, but to our mind the focus on taste has all but negated the original herbal virtues.

Use mint for…

Finding that mint cleaned the breath and settled the digestion, Romans of classical times valued it; they didn't have chocolate, but they did have after-dinner mint! They also brought mint to Britain. Perhaps, indeed, chewing mint leaves is superior, given that our chocolate 'mint' doesn't contain any of the herb, and precious little of its oil. It's also moot whether it'd be better for us to clean our teeth on freshly picked mint than use a spurious 'mint' toothpaste.

The essence of summer: flowering mint, meadow grasses, sultry sunshine and feeding hedge browns. Norfolk, July

The savor or smell of the water Mint rejoyceth the heart of man, for which cause they use to strew it in chambers and places of recreation, pleasure, and repose, and where feasts and banquets are made.
– Gerard (1597)

'Altogether,' says Dr Braddon, 'the oil of Peppermint forms the best, safest, and most agreeable of known antiseptics.'
– William Thomas Fernie (1897)

Peppermint's higher levels of aromatic oils come with necessary cautions, especially if you use peppermint essential oil. For example, while a mint tea of any species is soothing to the stomach, taking peppermint essential oil internally can lead to stomach spasms; it has been implicated in miscarriages. A drop or two of the essential oil, diluted with a carrier oil and applied to the brow, can relieve a migraine but larger quantities can cause bad headaches.

The vertues of the wild Mints are more especially to dissolve winde in the stomack, to helpe the chollick and those that are short-winded, and are an especiall remedy for those that have venerous dreames and pollutions in the night, used both inwardly, and the juyce being applyed outwardly to the testicles or cods.
– Parkinson (1640)

Caution: Avoid taking pennyroyal if you are pregnant.

Using any of the wild mints is considered safe, although pennyroyal should not be taken in pregnancy. Peppermint is the strongest and most cooling mint and is the 'official' mint. Mints with more of a spearmint

taste are gentler and warmer, and are better for children’s fevers, lack of appetite and weak digestive systems.

Medicinally, mint is classified as both cooling and heating, depending on use, species and form taken. This dual energetic pattern, tellingly, is recognised in traditional Chinese, Ayurvedic and western herbal traditions. You can feel the effect when taking mint tea: it warms, then cools the palate and digestion, even the skin; it is stimulating and then soothing.

The heating effect is seen in the way mint is used as a heart tonic, which relieves palpitations, sending blood to the skin’s surface, in the form of sweating. Hot mint tea is an excellent recourse for disturbed digestion, relieving spasm and relaxing the stomach walls, while also anaesthetising them. It is a proven and peerless remedy for such socially embarrassing conditions as bad breath, flatulence and hiccoughs; it works for indigestion, bloating, griping, colic, nausea and vomiting (including morning and travel sickness).

Mint is also antiseptic and mildy antiviral and antifungal. It combats mouth ulcers caused by *Herpes simplex* virus. It is good for coughs, colds and fever, alone or with elderberry. It also has a traditional use in treating gallstones and for hives, sinusitis and emphysema, earache and toothache, all in addition to its culinary versatility. And, who knows, as Parkinson writes (see left), mint may still be used to reduce ‘venerous dreames and pollutions in the night’, if that is what you want.

Mint tea

Fresh mint is better than dried to use for tea. Put a couple of sprigs in a teapot and pour in a cupful of **boiling water**. Cover and let infuse for a few minutes before straining and drinking.

But when you do not have fresh mint available, dried is still good. Dry the leaves on a screen outdoors or in an airing cupboard, until they crumble in the fingers. Use a teaspoonful per cup. Dried mint is a very useful addition to other medicinal herb teas, to make them taste better.

Mint tea
• indigestion
• colds and ’flu
• hot conditions
• flatulence
• nausea
• travel sickness
• headache
• stomach pains

Mint and raspberry water

Water can be deliciously and subtly flavoured by adding a few sprigs of **mint** and some **raspberries**, and left to stand in a cool place for a couple of hours. Either still or sparkling water can be used. This is a lovely cooling and refreshing summer drink.

If you want a stronger flavour, add a little cool mint tea to the jug.

Sekanjabin: A Persian oxymel of mint and vinegar

Boil **1 cup of water** with **4 tsp of white sugar**, till the sugar dissolves. Add **1/2 cup of vinegar** (we like to use raspberry vinegar). Simmer 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Remove from heat and add some sprigs of **fresh mint**, which adds its flavour to the oxymel as it cools. Serve diluted in ice-cold water, as you would a cordial. Alternatively, freeze in the form of ice cubes and store for future use.

Sekanjabin
• hot conditions
• lack of appetite
• weak digestion
• indigestion

Mint in white wine

Put a few sprigs of **mint** and a bottle of **white wine** in a jug, cover with a cloth and leave overnight. Remove the mint. This is a refreshing summer drink that can be served chilled, to keep you cool and improve your digestion.

For a more medicinal apéritif, add a few heads of meadowsweet blossom and a couple of sprigs of mugwort to your wine as well as the mint. This can be done at the same time or added later.

Mint in white wine
- lack of appetite
- weak digestion
- indigestion

Mint foot bath

Make a big pot of **mint tea**, strain it and pour it into a foot bath or a basin large enough for your feet. When it is the right temperature, put your feet in the liquid and soak for ten to twenty minutes. Use it hot for tired, achy feet or cold if your feet are really hot and sweaty.

Mint foot bath
- tired, achy feet
- hot, sweaty feet

God's wrath is His vinegar, mercy His honey.
These two are the basis of every oxymel.
If vinegar overpowers honey, a remedy is spoiled.
The people of the earth poured vinegar on Noah;
the Ocean of Divine Bounty poured sugar.
The Ocean replenished his sugar,
and overpowered the vinegar of the whole world.
– Rumi (13th-century Persia)

Mugwort.

Mugwort

Artemisia vulgaris

Mugwort is a stately, self-assured perennial, a tall summer presence at two or even three metres high, found in country and town alike. It is, however, far more than a roadside curiosity.

It is an ancient herb of healing, magic and divination throughout the world, a protector of women and travellers, renowned for its value in feminine disorders, and as a strong warming tonic. Mugwort was used in making ale in Europe before hops.

Asteraceae (Compositae) Daisy family

Description: A tall, slightly aromatic perennial with silvery flower spikes, growing to 1–3m. Leaves are pinnate, dark green and smooth above, silver beneath.

Habitat: Waysides, roadsides, waste ground.

Distribution: Found in most of the British Isles except south-west Ireland and the hills of northern England and Scotland. Found across Europe to Asia and North America.

Related species: Chinese mugwort (*A. verlotiorum*) is well established around London. Wormwood (*A. absinthium*) grows in parts of England and Wales. Hoary mugwort (*A. stelleriana*) is found on some coastal dunes, and sea wormwood (*Seriphidium*

maritimum) on dry edges of saltmarshes and sea-walls. There are a few other species with local distribution.

Worldwide, there are hundreds of species of *Artemisia*, including tarragon and North American sagebrush.

Parts used: Flowering tops and leaves.

The first clue to mugwort's significance might be found in its scientific name. *Artemis* was the Greek moon goddess and patron of women, especially at critical phases of their life cycle – at the onset of menstruation, in childbirth and at menopause.

Vulgaris can mean 'of the people', or, a little more condescendingly, 'common' and by extension 'abundant'. A frequently found herb that is available to assist women everywhere for critical times could hardly have a more apt name than *Artemesia vulgaris*.

Such qualities have been recognised far and wide. Mugwort has been called 'the mother of herbs' in several cultures. Ayurvedic practitioners in India use it in treating female reproductive disorders; a related species has the same function in southern Africa, and it has long been known in China for regulating the menses and 'calming a restless foetus'.

Culpeper placed it under the power of Venus; the Pennsylvania Dutch knew mugwort as *Aldy Fraw*, or 'old woman', underlining ancestral wisdom and feminine qualities; and a contemporary western herbalist calls it 'the feminine remedy *par excellence*'.

A saying from the North of England and Scotland underlines the traditional value of female spring tonics: 'If nettles were used in March and muggings [mugwort] in May, many a bra' lass wouldna turn t'clay.'

Another dimension to mugwort's popularity is its capacity to influence dreams, a powerful attribute in traditional cultures. A bundle of leaves and flower heads placed under the pillow, or made into a 'dream pillow', can calm sleep and protect from nightmares. It might also yield lucid

dreams in certain people. In this sense mugwort is shamanistic, underlining its use in divination.

A close-up of mugwort buds and flowers

The leaves and tops of the young shoots and flowers in this plant are all full of virtue, they are aromatic to the taste with a little sharpness. The herb has been famous from the earliest times, and Providence has placed it everywhere about our doors so that reason, and authority, as well as the notice of the senses, point it out for use, but chemistry has banished natural medicines.
– Hill (1756)

It is a continuing tradition of a number of Native American groups to burn bundles of cured and dried sagebrush (*A. tridentata*), a close relative of mugwort, as ‘smudge sticks’. These bundles burn slowly, like an

incense stick, producing smoke that is used to cleanse the energy of houses and sacred spaces (see page 109).

Burning a mugwort smudge stick certainly worked in calming the frantic energy when our teenage son had a big boozy party at our home. It also helps shift old, stuck energy – we found ourselves therapeutically clearing out the garden sheds next morning.

Use mugwort for…

Burning mugwort can dispel midges and other summer biting insects, a quality sometimes suggested as a source of its name (Old Saxon *muggia wort* or midge plant). A case is made too for the Saxon *moughte*, a moth or maggot, referring to mugwort's ability to keep away moths from clothes.

The thirteenth-century Physicians of Myddfai in central Wales knew mugwort as a useful insecticide: 'to destroy flies, let the mugwort be put in a place where they are frequent and they will die'.

Our own favourite explanation for the name mugwort is its former use as a herbal flavouring for ale. It could have literally been the 'mugwort', the measure of a brew, from a time before hops came in during and after the Middle Ages, and the Briton's drink gradually switched from ale to beer. Mugwort, along with yarrow, myrtle and heather, was a common ingredient in *gruit* or *grut*, a strong herbal ale. This is currently enjoying something of a revival in the modern microbrewery movement.

An infusion of mugwort in cold drinks, whether beer or fruit in origin, adds a sharp summer tang and aromatic smell that you can enjoy in safety. These make for a more homely and less risky prospect than absinthe, the liqueur derived from the closely related wormwood (*A. absinthium*). As the world knows, this was the tipple of the *fin de siècle* French literary and art world. Containing a toxic essential oil that mugwort lacks, absinthe could be fatally addictive. It was banned in Europe for most of the twentieth century.

Mugwort, it will be clear by now, has had something of a dangerous past, at the hazy margin of sacred and secular culture – indeed, from a time when there was no distinction made between the two.

American herbalist Maida Silverman believes that 'Folklore and superstition are bound up with the Mugwort plant to an extent hardly matched by any other herb.' She instances as the oldest superstition the first-century AD Roman naturalist Pliny, who recommended that travellers carry mugwort as an amulet for psychic protection. This belief lasted through and beyond the Middle Ages, only to be roundly condemned by the 'rational' herbalists like Gerard (1597) and Parkinson (1640).

Mugwort was a key Anglo-Saxon sacred herb: the *Leech Book of Bald* from tenth-century Wessex extols it as 'eldest of worts / Thou has might for three / And against thirty'. Again the great age and protective power of mugwort are emphasised.

In medieval times mugwort passed from the patronage of the pagan Artemis to the Christian care of St John the Baptist, who was said to have carried it into the wilderness to ward off evil. From this came 'St John's girdle' and the wearing of a mugwort garland on St John's day, 24 June, while dancing around the traditional fire. Throwing the garland into the fire would ensure protection for the following year, another pagan survival that so annoyed John Parkinson. He would be aghast to learn that a mugwort ceremony still marks midsummer in the Isle of Man (see box on page 108).

Wider afield, mugwort was known to Chinese medicine as a house protector and in the practice of moxibustion. This is an integral part of acupuncture, and many readers will have experienced the cone of dried mugwort leaves, moxa, being placed on the skin and burnt to stimulate an acupuncture point. The particular application of moxa is for treating abdominal pain from the cold, and it is mugwort's warming quality that makes it effective.

One other aspect of mugwort and fire can be mentioned briefly. Other names for the plant, gypsy’s tobacco and muggar, record its persistent use as a smoking leaf inside strips of newspaper.

Burnt or not, mugwort has valuable warming qualities. It is known herbally as an aromatic bitter, which warms the digestion and stimulates a sluggish liver. It encourages the secretion of digestive juices and its oils help eliminate gas and griping.

On a hot summer day, when the noxious fumes and stagnant air in the city seem even more oppressive than usual, it really is a 'comfort' to crush a few leaves of the plant in one's hand and inhale the clean, pungent aroma. Mugwort lives up to its reputation and certainly has the power to revive the spirits and refresh the senses.
– Silverman (1997)

Herbalists value mugwort as a general calmer of the nervous system, helping to relieve stress and nervous tension. Mugwort pillows can help soothe disturbed sleep as well as promote dreaming. In general the plant has an uplifting effect on mood and is valuable in treating forms of mild depression linked with digestive weakness.

Taken as a tincture, mugwort can help in normalising menstrual flow, and is particularly useful for bringing on delayed or suppressed periods where they have been absent for some time. It is a good herb for young women at puberty, helping to establish a regular cycle. Because it stimulates the uterus, it is not normally used in western herbalism during pregnancy, though in China it is an accepted treatment in preventing miscarriage.

Mugwort has some antimalarial activity, though much milder than Sweet Annie (*Artemisia annua*). It is also effective against threadworms and roundworms, like its stronger relative wormwood, and is an effective wash for treating fungal infections.

Manx mugwort magic

Mugwort is the symbolic plant of the Isle of Man and sprigs of it are worn on Manx national day, 5 July. This is St John's day in the old Julian calendar (it has been 24 June in England and Scotland since 1752, but the old date is kept on Man). On St John's eve mugwort would be gathered and made into wreaths to be worn by cattle and men alike. Hedge and gorse fires were lit and cattle forced through while men and boys jumped over the flames. This combination of mugwort and fire would protect beast and people from evil spirits for the coming year. The next day was then safe for the many civic ceremonies of Midsummer Court, including the promulgation of laws from Tynwald Hill. As an invited guest, even Queen Elizabeth II on her visit in 2003 duly wore her spray of mugwort or *bollan bane* (white herb), as it is known locally.

Harvesting mugwort

Pick mugwort in summer, collecting the flower spikes when they are flowering or just before the flowers open when the buds are still silvery. The leaves can be collected too.

Mugwort tincture

Because mugwort becomes more aromatic as it dries, the tincture is best made with **dried mugwort**, although you can use fresh. Fill a jar with mugwort, then top up with **vodka**, shaking it to remove air bubbles. Put the jar in a cool dark place for 2 to 4 weeks, then strain and bottle.
Dose: 1–4ml, three times a day.

Mugwort tincture
• irregular periods
• suppressed periods
• gas and griping
• stress and anxiety

Mugwort punch

Pour **a cupful of red wine** into a saucepan.
Add **a stick of cinnamon, 5 cloves** and **a handful of mugwort tops**.
Bring to a boil, then turn down the heat and simmer gently with a lid on for half an hour.
Strain out the herbs and spices. Sweeten with **honey**. It can be taken hot or cold before a meal to stimulate appetite and digestion. Can be drunk fresh or kept in a bottle for several weeks.

Mugwort punch
• poor appetite
• sluggish digestion
• gas and griping
• stress and anxiety

Mugwort pillow

Pick **mugwort flowers and leaves** and dry them. Make a small bag for the pillow out of **cloth**, leaving one end open – any size you like, but 20cm x 30cm works well. Fill the bag loosely with the dried mugwort so that the finished pillow will be 1 or 2cm thick, then stitch up the open end. Place this under your regular pillow. Smaller cloth bags of mugwort can be stored among clothing to discourage clothes moths.

Mugwort pillow
• protection from bad dreams
• promotes lucid dreams
• stress and anxiety

Mugwort smudge stick

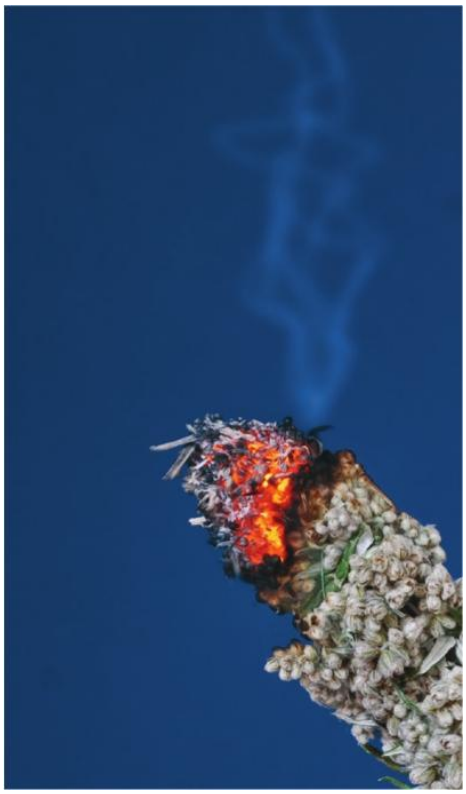
Pick the silvery top 20cm or so of **mugwort** when the flowers are in bud or first open. Leave them in a cool airy place to dry for a few days. Before they dry completely, and while they are still flexible, make small bundles up to about 3cm thick, with the stem ends together. Starting at the stem end, wind a piece of **cotton thread** in a spiral around the

bundle to the end and then back again, tying off securely. Leave the bundles to dry completely.

To use, hold the smudge stick by the stem end and light the other end with a match. You may need to blow on it at first to keep it burning. Wave the stick around with a circular motion as you move through a room or around a person – the movement helps keep the stick burning as well as spreading the smoke through the air.

Smudge stick
- clears negative and old stuck energy
- calms and protects
- warms and dries

The underside of a mugwort leaf is covered with silvery, downy hairs.



Mullein.

Mullein

Verbascum spp.

Mullein is unmistakable when it is in flower, with its spires of yellow flowers on a spike reaching two or more metres tall. It likes disturbed ground and dry soil, often growing on roadsides.

The flowers, infused in oil, are a remedy for earache and other nerve pain. The leaves and flowers taken as a tea relieve dry irritable coughs. Mullein, so supple and strong itself, has an affinity for the spine and helps in setting bones.

Scrophulariaceae Figwort family

Description: Biennial plants, growing in their first year as a rosette of downy leaves, and sending up a tall spike with yellow flowers in their second summer.

Habitat: Sides of fields, hedgerows, dry ground.

Species used: Great mullein is the species generally discussed in herbals, but any of the tall, yellow-flowered mulleins can be used, as can white mullein (*Verbascum album*).

Distribution: Great mullein (*V. thapsus*) is native to Europe, northern Africa and Asia, and naturalised in parts of North America, Africa and Australia. Common in the British Isles except in the far north and west. Hoary mullein (*V. pulverulentum*) is local in East Anglia, and dark mullein (*V. nigrum*) is mostly found in the south.

Related species: There are about 300 species of *Verbascum*.

Parts used: Leaves and flowers, sometimes the root.

Mullein is an herb for the lungs and throat and can be consumed in any rational quantity needed, being basically free of toxicity.
– Moore (1979)

Mullein has a long history of use in Europe, and has been attributed magical powers in several mythologies. Almost three thousand years ago, according to Homer, Odysseus used the root of moly, which was probably the white mullein, as a protection against the enchantments of Circe. Odysseus was lucky to have the help of Hermes, for, in Homer's words, 'it was an awkward plant to dig up, at any rate for a mere man. But the gods, after all, can do anything.'

There are records of the long stalk of mullein being dipped in tallow and used as a taper by Roman legionaries and in medieval funerals. It also has a reputed association with witches' covens, recalled in the common name hag's taper.

Mullein leaves have made a natural toilet paper, baby nappies, food wrappers and soothing insoles for shoes – all possible emergency uses today. Despite their softness, however, mullein leaves can be irritating when dry because of all their little hairs. It is this attribute that gave the plant the name of Quaker rouge, as Quaker girls were said to redden their cheeks by rubbing the leaves on them.

A cure for hoarseness, with mullein and fennel in equal parts, cooked in wine, goes back to Hildegard of Bingen in the 1100s.

John Parkinson (1640) recommends a decoction of the leaves with sage, marjoram and chamomile (applied externally) for cramps. He mentions that country men gave a broth of mullein to cattle that had coughs and used a poultice of the leaves for horses' hooves injured in shoeing.

A Victorian doctor, Dr Quinlan, publicised a traditional Irish TB treatment in which one handful of fresh mullein leaves was boiled with two pints of milk, strained and sweetened with honey; the mix was to be drunk twice a day.

Mullein is the only herb known to man that has remarkable narcotic properties without being poisonous and harmful.
– Dr Christopher (1976)

Use mullein for…

Mullein's soft fuzzy leaves give a hint of its soothing qualities for internal use. Its particular affinity is for the respiratory system, but it also calms and strengthens the nerves, digestion and urinary system. It is good for swollen glands, and helps relieve pain in general.

Think of mullein tea for easing throat and chest problems, especially dry and irritable coughs. It can quickly soothe an irritating tickle at the back of the throat.

Mullein flower oil is the best natural remedy for earache. Our son's ear infections when he was little were always quickly relieved (except for once when the oil was old and had lost its potency). The oil can be used externally for any kind of swelling and irritation.

Following up on ancient precedent, a useful remedy to ease the foot pain of plantar fasciitis is to put a fresh mullein leaf in your shoe, replacing with a new one when the first one has dried out.

Mullein poultices for external use are excellent to draw out splinters and boils, but, like the tea, also work at deeper bodily levels for backaches, lymphatic swellings and even broken bones. The poultices are effective in soothing swollen glands and for mumps.

Harvesting mullein

The leaves are best picked before the plant sends up its flower spike. Dry the leaves whole and then crumble them for storage.

The flowers are quite soft, so pick them carefully to avoid bruising. Spread in a single layer on a sheet of paper or a mesh screen to dry.

Mullein tea

The leaves can be used on their own, or you can add flowers. To make the tea, use a good rounded tablespoonful of the **dried herb**, slightly more of the fresh, according to taste. Pour a mugful of **boiling water** over it, cover and steep for 15 minutes. Strain through muslin or a fine sieve to remove any loose leaf hairs if you are using the dried leaf. Drink freely for dry coughs or any irritation of throat and chest.

Mullein tea

- dry irritable coughs
- bronchitis
- laryngitis
- pleurisy
- swollen glands

Mullein flower oil

Pick the **flowers** on a dry sunny day, and lay them on a sheet of paper to dry a little overnight. Put them in a small jar and pour enough **extra virgin olive oil** over them to cover the flowers completely. Close the jar with a piece of cloth held on with a rubber band rather than using a lid – this allows any moisture to escape.

Put the jar on a sunny windowsill for two weeks, stirring every day to keep the flowers submerged in the oil. This is important, as the flowers will tend to float and may go mouldy if left exposed.

When the flowers have faded and become quite transparent, the oil is ready to be strained and bottled. Pour through a fine sieve into another jar. There will probably be a layer of water at the bottom of the jar, so the oil needs to be poured slowly and carefully into a third jar, leaving the watery layer behind. Store in a cool dark place for up to a year.

For earache, put 1 to 3 drops of oil in the affected ear as needed for pain.

Mullein flower oil

- earache
- nerve pain
- haemorrhoids & piles
- chest rub
- chilblains

Mullein poultice

To make a poultice, lay a few **mullein leaves** in a dish (for a splinter you'll only need part of a leaf) and pour a little **boiling water** on them to soften them. Leave until they are cool enough to handle, then place them on the affected part. The poultice can be held on with a bandage, and you can keep it warm by holding a hot water bottle against it.

This is an excellent treatment for removing splinters, to draw boils, to soothe an aching back and for any lymphatic swellings. It can also be used to help heal broken bones, such as ribs or toes, that cannot be set.

Mullein poultice

- splinters

- boils
- backache
- mumps
- swollen glands
- broken bones

Tip: Don’t use a bottle with a pipette top for long-term storage of mullein oil. We have found that volatile oils from the mullein destroy the rubber bulb after a while, and the oil loses its potency.

Nettle

Urtica dioica

Nettles are one of the most useful of plants, despite their protective sting. The young tops are delicious and nutritious, a natural vitamin and mineral supplement. Medicinally, the leaves, seeds and roots are used to treat a wide range of conditions including anaemia, arthritis, asthma, burns, eczema, infections, inflammations, kidney stones, prostate enlargement, rheumatism and urinary problems.

Nettles can also be used to make rope, nets, a linen-like cloth and paper, a dye, insect repellant and green manure.

Urticaceae Nettle family

Description: A wind-pollinated perennial with dark green, hairy, stinging leaves and stems, and tough, tangled yellow roots.

Habitat: Woods, river banks, farms, roadsides, field edges and wherever the nitrogen content of the soil is high.

Distribution: Universal throughout the British Isles and most of the temperate world.

Related species: The small nettle (*U. urens*), an annual, is similar in use and appearance; it is the species used in homeopathy. Fen nettle or stingless nettle (*U. galeopsifolia*) is found only in Cambridgeshire. Roman nettle (*U. pilulifera*) also has similar properties, but is rare, if not extinct in the wild.

Parts used: Leaves, tops, seeds, rhizomes and roots.

Stinging nettles are one of the best plants for human health, both as food and medicine. They are a complete, ready-packaged natural vitamin and mineral supplement, grow everywhere and are free – an ultimate hedgerow medicine.

Nettle was the Anglo-Saxon sacred herb, *wergulu*, and in medieval times nettle beer was drunk for rheumatism. Nettle tops helped milk to sour, as a rennet substitute in cheese-making. Nettle leaves brought fruit to ripening, and were used to pack plums; the whole plant is still useful as an excellent compost or green manure.

Nettle's high vitamin C content made it a valuable spring tonic for our ancestors after a winter of living on grain and salted meat, with hardly any green vegetables. Nettle soup and porridge were popular spring tonic purifiers, but a pasta or pesto from the leaves is a worthily nutritious modern alternative. We find all but the youngest shoots rather fibrous, and prefer a purée, as in a nettle form of the Indian dish *sag paneer*.

Nettle soup is described by one modern writer as 'Springtime herbalism at one of its finest moments'. This soup is the Scottish *kail*. Tibetans believe that their sage and poet Milarepa (AD 1052–1135) lived solely on

nettle soup for many years, until he himself turned green: a literal green man.

Use nettle for…

Modern lifestyles need the kind of nutrition that nettle can offer. It is now known that the mineral content of intensively farmed foods has decreased dramatically over the past half-century, so even people eating a healthy diet may be mineral-deficient. Mineral deficiency contributes to a wide range of chronic health problems, including diabetes and cardiac disease, so nettles can improve diverse conditions purely through their mineral content.

Nettles have an antihistamine effect, valuable for treating hayfever and other allergies. They can help reduce the severity of asthma attacks. For treating hayfever, they combine well with elderflower.

Nettles enhance natural immunity, helping protect us from infections. Nettle tea drunk often at the start of a feverish illness is beneficial. It can be combined with elderflower, lime blossom, yarrow or mint.

Nettles reduce blood sugar levels and stimulate the circulation, which supports treatment of diabetes. They also dilate the peripheral blood vessels and promote elimination of urine, which helps lower high blood pressure.

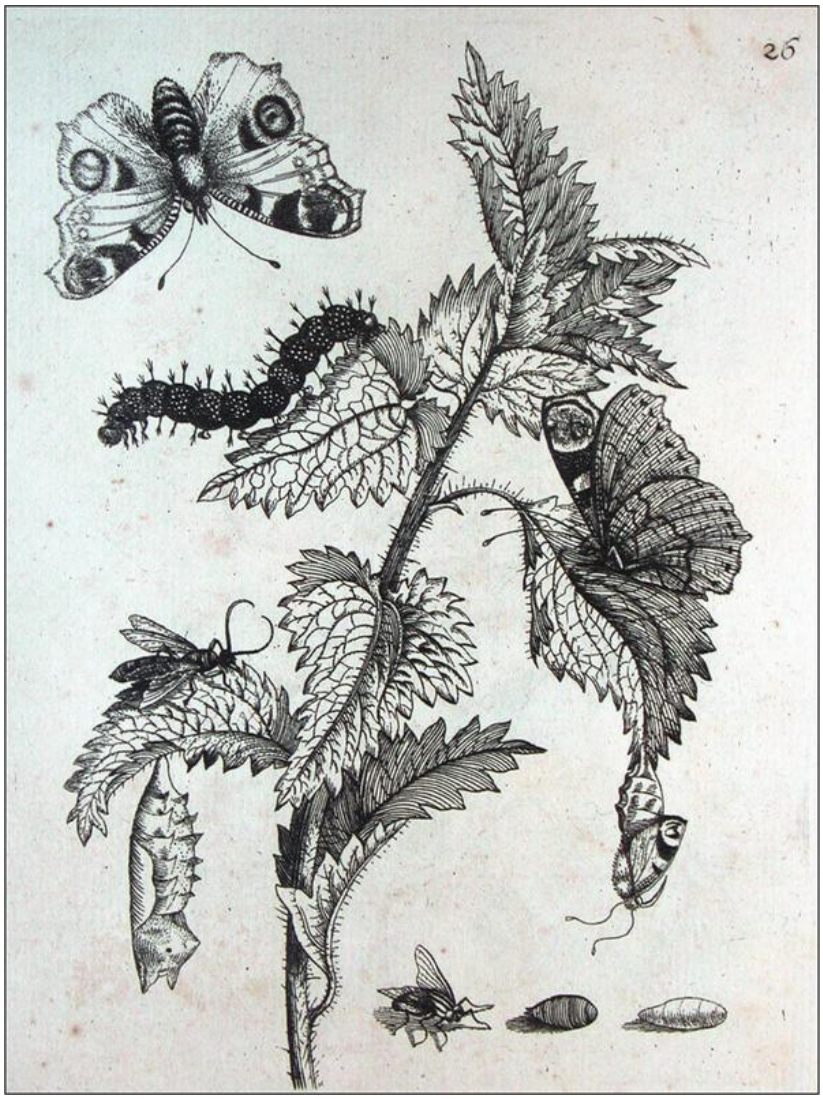
Taking nettles has an amphoteric effect on breast milk production, meaning that mothers make more milk if the flow is scanty or less if the flow is excessive.

The sting from nettles comes from the hairs, which are like tiny glass syringes that inject a stinging acid fluid

It is more appropriate that nature has given this plant the protection of [a] *stinging exterior. Without it, we should probably never have the opportunity to benefit from its healing power. Animals, with their instinctive knowledge of what is good for them, would not leave us even one leaf.*
– Dr Vogel (1989)

Nettles have long been considered a blood tonic and are a wonderful treatment for anaemia, as they are high in both iron and chlorophyll. The iron in nettles is very easily absorbed and assimilated.

… many may agree that it would be better to return from a trip to the country with a bag of nettles than with bunches of wild flowers.
– Audrey Wynne Hatfield (1969)



Stinging nettle and one of the insects using it as a food plant, the peacock butterfly and larva, by Maria Merian, 1717

The root is a leading herbal treatment for enlarged prostate, taken on its own as a tincture or with saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*).

Stinging nettles help clear the blood of urates and toxins, partly through stimulating the kidneys. Nettle tops make a tea for treating gout and arthritis. Another old arthritis remedy is to whip the affected joints with fresh nettles (*Urtica urens* has a stronger effect than *U. dioica*). This creates a temporary nettle rash but alleviates pain and stiffness.

If you think this is odd behaviour, consider ‘sado-botany’, in which sexual partners beat each other with nettles for stimulation and pain/pleasure. The Romans and Greeks of old took nettle seed as an aphrodisiac.

What cooks will tell you is that two minutes of boiling nettle leaves will neutralise both the silica ‘syringes’ of the stinging cells and the histamine or formic acid-like fluid that is so painful.

But if you are brave you can try munching raw leaves. Pinch the top shoot on a young nettle, roll into a tight ball and eat – delicious. This, incidentally, is the technique used in the world nettle-eating championship, held annually in Dorset (eat all the nettles you can in an hour, washed down by beer – the event is sponsored by a pub).

Sir John Harington (1607) had just the remedy for these competitors:

Tho Nettles ftinke, yet make they recompence,/ If your belly by the Collicke paine endures,/ Againft the Collicke Nettle-feed and hony/ Is Phyfick: better none is had for money./ It breedeth fleepe, ftaies vomits, fleams [bloodletting instruments] *doth foften,/ It helpes him of the Gowte that eates it often.*

Use nettle leaves and stalks as an everyday nourisher, an energetic changer, a marvelous kidney/adrenal ally, a digestive restorative, a respiratory strengthener, an ally for women, a hair and skin nourisher, and a prompt hemostatic.
– Weed (1989)

Harvesting nettle tops

Nettle tops are best in the spring, but if the nettles are repeatedly cut back they will send up fresh shoots, which can be harvested through summer and into autumn. Harvest the top 10 or 15cm, wearing rubber gloves to pick them, or use a pair of scissors to cut and lift them into a bag or basket.

Rinse them if they need it. Young spring nettles can be frozen for use later in the year. Blanch them in boiling water for two minutes, then drain and cool. Chop up or leave whole, and store in freezer bags.

Nettle tea

Use a couple of fresh **nettle tops** in a teapot per cup of **boiling water**, and allow to infuse for 15 to 20 minutes. This tastes so much better than

any nettle tea you can buy! Drink as often as you like. Can also be used as a hair rinse and massaged into the scalp to promote hair growth.

Nettle tops – tea
• spring tonic
• anaemia
• bleeding
• diarrhoea
• gout
• fluid retention
• low blood pressure
• high blood pressure
• coughs
• allergies
• regulates breast milk production
• skin problems
• high blood sugar

Nettle tops – externally
• cuts and wounds
• hair tonic

Nettle juice powder

Juice fresh **nettle tops**, then mix the juice with enough nettle leaf powder (made by reducing **dried nettle tops** in a coffee grinder, then putting the powder through a sieve) to the thickness of double cream. Spread on fruit leather trays in a dehydrator or on non-stick baking trays in a warm oven until dry. Crumble and store in airtight jars.

Dose: Half to one teaspoonful daily.

Juice powder
• spring tonic
• anaemia
• gout
• fluid retention
• low blood pressure
• high blood pressure
• allergies
• regulates breast milk production
• skin problems
• high blood sugar

Nettle top decocted tincture

By boiling nettles, you get the minerals that are not extracted well by alcohol. Chop up your **nettle tops**, and divide into two even batches. Put one half in a blender with enough 40% **vodka** to blend, and liquidise. Put the other half in a saucepan with just enough **water** to cover, bring to the boil and simmer for 15 minutes. Allow to cool.

Strain and measure both liquids, then combine, making sure the volume of alcohol is equal to or greater than the volume of water. (If your water volume is greater, return it to the saucepan and simmer down until it is a little less.) Bottle and label.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful three times a day. For burns, hold the burn under cold running water for a few minutes first if possible, then wet a cotton wool ball with the tincture and hold it on the burn until the pain eases.

Nettle tops – tincture
- stops bleeding
- promotes urine flow
- burns
- skin problems

Nettle soup

Sauté 1 or 2 chopped **onions** in a little **ghee, butter or olive oil** until the onions are lightly browned. Add about a litre of **water or vegetable stock**, and several handfuls of **fresh nettle tops**. Simmer gently for 10 or 15 minutes, then purée with a hand blender and serve. You can add nutmeg, pepper or other spices to taste. Then add cream, potatoes, sorrel or whatever you like – the possible variations are endless.

Nettle soup
- spring tonic
- anaemia

Nettle flowers are soon followed by the seeds

Nettle seed electuary

Cut nettle tops when the **seed** is almost ripe and lay them outdoors on brown paper. This allows any small insects that live on them the time to escape. When dry, strip the seeds off the stems. Grind the seeds in a coffee grinder and mix the powder into a paste with **runny honey**. Store in wide-mouthed jars.

Dose: 1 or 2 teaspoonfuls daily.

Nettle seed electuary
- kidney support
- coughs
- yin tonic (TCM)
- aphrodisiac
- convalescence

Researchers gave a few teaspoons of the [nettle] *extract daily to 67 men over age 60 with BPH* [benign prostatic hypertrophy] *and found that the herb significantly reduced their need to get up at night to urinate…. German medical herbalists recommend two to three teaspoons of extract a day to treat BPH.*
– Duke (1997)

Harvesting nettle roots

Nettle roots can be dug up whenever they are needed, but are probably at their best in the autumn. You will need a stout fork and a pair of close-fitting gloves. The yellow roots are tenacious and tangled.

Wash them thoroughly and cut into pieces a few centimetres long. To dry, spread on a cake rack or a screen; put in an airing cupboard until brittle.

Nettle root decoction

Simmer a handful of dried or fresh **nettle root** in a litre of **water** for 20 minutes, then strain.

Dose: Drink a cupful two or three times daily, storing the rest in the fridge until you need it and then reheating.

Nettle root decoction
• prostate enlargement
• infections
• inflammation
• bacterial and fungal infections

Nettle root decocted tincture

Put fresh or dried **nettle roots** in a saucepan with enough **water** to cover them, and simmer for 20 minutes. When cool, pour off and measure the liquid, but keep the roots. Add an equal amount of 40% **vodka** to the liquid and pour it in a large jar or jars with the roots. Add a few handfuls of fresh chopped roots. Put the jars in a cupboard and leave for 3 to 4 weeks, shaking occasionally. Strain off and bottle the liquid.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful daily to maintain prostate health, or three times daily for more acute problems.

Decocted tincture
• prostate enlargement
• infections
• inflammation
• bacterial and fungal infections

Caution: Do not take nettle root during pregnancy.

Oak.

Oak

Quercus robur, Q. petraea

Oak has been a sacred and an economically productive tree for millennia, the symbol of Britain's secure power (many other countries rightly claim it too). But it has been a victim of its own success, with most of its old forests now gone.

In terms of hedgerow medicine it still has uses, mainly of the bark, leaves and acorns rather than the galls of earlier times. Oak is also one of Dr Bach's original flower essences, so its subtle authority lives on.

Fagaceae Beech family

Description: A well-loved tree, which grows to 40m tall and can live for a thousand years. The lobed leaves are mainly deciduous, and the flowers are catkins borne in spring. Acorns in little cups are diagnostic for all oaks.

Habitat: Hedgerows, woods, parkland.

Distribution: The English or pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*) is native to most of Europe, and is abundant in the British Isles. The sessile or Durmast oak (*Q. petraea*) is commoner in the west, and is less often planted.

Species: The pedunculate oak has acorns on stalks, while the sessile oak has no acorn stalks. Both species can be used herbally. Many oak species from around the world are found planted in British parks and gardens. White oak (*Q. alba*) is the main North American species used medicinally.

Parts used: Bark, leaves, acorns, galls.

We have chosen the picture on the left from among many we've taken of oak in order to convey something of the massive presence and protecting influence of this most British of trees.

There is insufficient space to relate the myths, sacred and secular, the uses, and the central role of oak in the British consciousness. Geoffrey Grigson points out that it has been too necessary and familiar a tree to allow any other general names than its own: oak it is.

Suffice it to say that oak's timber built houses, cathedrals and ships, made furniture, barrels and pews; its bark tanned leather for shoes and saddles, and provided dyes; its acorns fed pigs and was a famine food or coffee substitute; its galls (oak apples) gave ink; its wood supplied fuel and charcoal; the tree was a space for mistletoe, ivy and ferns; it sheltered insects, birds, animals – and outlaws (Robin Hood) and kings (Charles II).

There was once a saying that oak was so important that a person came in contact with it every day of their life, from newborn's cradle to old man's coffin. Such a universal and steadying presence has been lost in modern times, but the tree still offers uses for an enthusiast of hedgerow medicine.

Use oak for…

The **bark** is the 'official' botanical drug, used as an astringent. The *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia* specifies dried bark from younger stems and branches of *Quercus robur*, though herbalists in practice find that other oak species can be used interchangeably and that acorns, leaves and oak apples, also rich in tannins, have equivalent benefits (nobody uses oak root!).

Tannins were first isolated chemically from oak bark, and it is thought that ‘tannin’ came from a Celtic term for oak. Oak, tannins and leather tanning have always been synonymous.

Oak should be placed first on any list of native remedies for hikers and backpackers. It is common, easily identifiable, easy to use, and effective for most of the potential problems faced in the wilderness.
– Moore (1979)

For the first time in history we can manage without oak. The reputation remains, but the worshipful and powerful tree has declined into a patriarch on half-pay.
– Grigson (1958)

Astringents are the body’s tighteners and driers, being effective in binding and toning tissue and reducing excess discharges. The conditions treated by astringent herbs include diarrhoea, dysentery, eye, mouth and throat inflammations, disturbed mucous membranes of the digestive tract, and bleeding, burns and sores.

Astringents are also anti-microbial and antiseptic, helping to create a barrier against infection. Herbalist David Hoffmann explains this by saying ‘astringents produce a kind of temporary leather coat on the surface of tissue’.

Oak bark is most often taken as a decoction, small strips of bark from young branches being boiled in water for 10–15 minutes and drunk. It is strong and bitter from the 15% to 20% of tannins it contains, and is the primary treatment for acute diarrhoea, taken in small but plentiful doses.

If self-medication for diarrhoea is not successful after three or four days, the usual advice is to consult a professional.

The same preparation is good as a mouthwash for gargling in sore throats, tonsillitis and laryngitis, as a douche for leucorrhoea and as an enema for haemorrhoids.

In Germany the ‘official’ uses for oak bark decoction include inflammation of gums and throat, sweating of the feet, chilblains and anal fissures (the last three in a bath at room temperature). The dried young bark is also powdered in a grinder as a tooth powder, as in our recipe on the next page.

The **leaves** of oak in spring have been used hot as a tea to relieve diarrhoea, and after cooling as a soothing compress for sore eyes. Culpeper writes that the distilled water of oak leaves is ‘one of the best remedies I know of for the whites [leucorrhoea] in women’. In the field, chewing the leaves and applying them to bites, open wounds or ulcers eases inflammation and promotes healing.

Acorns are the signature of oaks worldwide, and well chosen as a symbol for Britain’s National Trust. While enjoyed raw by pigs and squirrels, humans find acorns palatable only when cooked after repeated boiling and renewing of the water, the tannins being gradually leached out. Acorns were a famine food for the Anglo-Saxons, but some North American oaks have more palatable acorns, and Native Americans living in forested areas had acorn flour as a staple part of their diet.

During the First World War an ersatz coffee was made in Germany from roasted and ground acorns. The drink is still available today. It is tasty, good for those with poor digestion and has little caffeine.

Acorns were once a herbal specific for alcoholism, a use reflected in a modern homeopathic remedy formulated to control craving.

Oak twig toothbrush

Oak twigs can be used as a natural toothbrush with built-in antiseptic and anti-inflammatory benefits. Simply pick a small twig and chew the end to fray it, then use this to massage your gums and clean your teeth.

Oak twig toothbrush

- gum problems

Harvesting oak bark

Select young branches about 1 to 3cm in diameter, and use a sharp knife to remove small strips of bark, cutting along the length of the branch. The bark is thicker than you might expect, brown on the outside but white underneath. Dry the bark strips in a warm place.

Tooth powder

Break up the dried oak bark into small bits and grind finely in a coffee grinder. Sieve to remove larger pieces. The fennel seed in the recipe can also be ground in this way.

Mix 3 parts **oak bark powder** with 1 part **cinnamon powder**, 1 part **fennel seed powder** and 1 part **bicarbonate of soda**, or to suit your own taste.
Store in a small jar, and use to brush your teeth every day.

Tooth powder
- gum disease
- weak gums
- bleeding gums
- mouth ulcers

Pellitory of the wall

Parietaria judaica syn. *P. diffusa, P. officinalis*

This overlooked wild plant is a noted tonic for the kidneys and bladder. It is soothing and increases the flow of urine, while also reducing inflammation and helping dissolve kidney stones. Herbalists use the tea for a range of urinary problems.

Urticaceae Nettle family

Description: A red-stemmed perennial with tiny white flowers, growing mainly on walls, to about 20–30cm high. Forms dense patches locally.

Habitat: Walls, stony places, hedgebanks and gardens.

Distribution: Widespread in England and Wales, less common in Scotland and Ireland. Native to Europe and north Africa, introduced to North America and Australia.

Related species: Stinging nettles, and mind-your-own-business (*Soleirolia soleirolii*).

Parts used: Above-ground parts.

The dried herbe Paritary made up with hony into an Electuarie, or the juice of the herbe, or the decoction thereof made up with Sugar or Hony, is a singular remedy for any old continuall or dry cough, the shortnesse of breath and wheezings in the throate.
– Parkinson (1640)

Pellitory, named from the Latin *paries* or house wall, was once given a variety of ‘virtues’ or uses, but herbalists today regard it as a specialised urinary tract herb. It is an excellent gentle tonic for cystitis, nephritis, pyelitis, kidney stones, renal colic and urinary problems linked with prostate enlargement. It will relieve oedema and urine retention, and is soothing as well as urine-producing.

In the seventeenth century, John Parkinson and Nicholas Culpeper wrote of using pellitory internally for coughs and uterine pain, and externally for skin problems, burns and hot conditions. Parkinson said the juice put in the ears ‘eases the noise and hummings in them’ and that the herb ‘applied to the fundament’ opens piles and soothes their pain.

Culpeper had such faith in a syrup made of pellitory juice and honey that he promised free treatment to anyone who took a teaspoonful daily or

even just once a week and still got dropsy (oedema or fluid retention).

This was a popular remedy at the time. We came across it again in a Norfolk gentleman's notebook:

For a Dropsie
Given mee 18th Novem: 1664 by Mr Sheepeside
Take ye juice of Pellitorie of ye wall & boyle it up to a syruppe with honey & so keepe it in a Glasse. Take one spoonefull of this every Morninge.

Our own preference is to make an infusion as a tea, but a pellitory syrup or even the ale tincture that was once current would be equally effective today.

Pellitory is used in Europe to treat *Herpes zoster* infections, and has possible wider applications in combating viral infections. There is ongoing research into its effects on FIV, the feline form of HIV.

Pellitory causes hayfever in some people, and is called asthma weed in parts of Australia. It is declared a noxious weed there, which must be destroyed. Even in Britain, it is best avoided if you suffer allergies.

Pellitory is prettiest when viewed up close in flower. The black insects above are aphids

Pellitory tea

Harvest pellitory in the summer while it is flowering, breaking off a stem about halfway up (it snaps easily), leaving the rest to grow back. The fresh herb is considered to be the most effective, but it works well dried too.

Pour a cup of **boiling water** onto 2 teaspoons of the **chopped fresh** or 1 teaspoon of the **dried herb** and leave to infuse for 10–15 minutes. Add honey to taste (the tea is somewhat astringent).

Dose: Drink a cupful three times a day.

Pellitory tea
- cystitis
- bladder irritation
- urinary gravel
- painful urination
- fluid retention

Its action upon the urinary calculus is perhaps more marked than any other simple agent at present employed.
– Mrs Grieve (1931)

Ribwort plantain, *Plantago lanceolata*, showing the lengthwise leaf ribs

Plantain

Plantago major, P. lanceolata, P. media

Common weeds of footpaths and lawns, the plantains were once celebrated as magical herbs in pre-Christian times, and have followed European settlers around the world.

Plantain is the best first-aid remedy for insect stings, and quickly deals with bites, cuts and ulcers. It is widely available, safe to use and effective for a number of common ailments including old coughs, bronchitis, sore throats and irritable digestive tracts.

Plantaginaceae Plantain family

Description: Perennial plants with a rosette of ribbed leaves and wind-pollinated flowers on erect stalks.

Habitat: Footpaths, roadsides, waste ground, meadows and lawns.

Species used: Greater plantain (*P. major*), ribwort plantain (*P. lanceolata*) and hoary plantain (*P. media*).

Distribution: Ribwort and greater plantain are found virtually throughout the British Isles, while hoary plantain is mainly confined to England. There are around 250 species in the *Plantago* genus worldwide.

Related species: There are two other British species, which are found mainly around the coast: buckshorn plantain (*P. coronopus*) and sea plantain (*P. maritima*). They have similar properties.

Parts used: Leaves, seeds, sometimes root.

Plantain is a plant now regarded primarily as a weed except by herbalists, but it had an illustrious past, being one of nine sacred herbs of the Anglo-Saxons, a ‘mother of worts’. It had a reputation for clearing poisons, from bites as well as infections.

Plantains are found almost anywhere there is human habitation, though they have never had an economic value. Greater plantain in particular grows by preference on the compacted soils of paths and tracks, and seems to thrive on being downtrodden.

To Native Americans this plant became ‘white man’s footprint’, one that sprang up in the footsteps of the settlers. The plant’s name *Plantago* itself comes from *planta* or sole of the foot.

The Anglo-Saxon name of plantain was *waybroed* or *waybrode*, later ‘waybread’, because it grew by the way or path rather than because it made wonderful eating.

Plantains are familiar ‘weeds’ in any lawn, and will return, even when cut often and short. The young leaves have a slightly bitter flavour from tannins, and though quite tough can be eaten in salads or as a spinach. They become bitter and more fibrous as they age. Buckshorn plantain is grown as a perennial salad crop in Italy and other parts of Europe.

Children all over the world use the flower heads of ribwort, as seen in the photo on the opposite page, as a sort of natural pop gun in the game ‘soldiers’ or ‘kemps’.

In Europe a piece of plantain root used to be carried in the pocket to protect against snakebite, but was no doubt more effective when actually applied to the wound as well as being ingested. The North American name snakeweed is an echo of that time.

Use plantain for…

Ribwort is the number one hedgerow remedy for insect stings and bites. A crushed leaf rubbed onto the painful area will bring relief at once – it’s almost miraculous.

Hoary plantain (Plantago media) is the most beautiful plantain, with pale lilac flowers

Pliny records in the first century AD that 'Themison, a famous physician, sets forthe a whole booke of the hearbe waibred or plantaine, wherein he highly praiseth it; and challengeth it to himself the honour of first finding it out, notwithstanding it be a triviall and common hearbe trodden under everie man's foot.'
– quoted in Gordon (1980)

Running sore in ye Legge
Plantine water & oatmeal flour made into a plaster on the sore, wetting again with Plantine water and use plantine water to wash it.
– Archdale Palmer's recipes 1659–72

Indian bandaid.
– a Cherokee elder's view of plantain

Greater plantain also works for pain relief, but the leaves are tougher and not as juicy, so choose ribwort first if it is available. We find that any

plantain, applied immediately, is effective for nettle stings and prefer it to dock leaf.

Plantain's antihistamine effect is also beneficial for hayfever and other allergies, and combines well as a tea with elderflower and mint. Plantain has long been a trusted plant for healing wounds (a vulnerary), and Shakespeare mentions it twice as a healer of broken shins. We haven't tried it on broken bones, but have found it to be very efficient at clearing heat and inflammation.

A patient of Julie's had deep red and painful shins from a radiation burn, and came every few days for several weeks for a dressing of fresh plantain juice mixed with slippery elm powder. Other fresh herbs such as chickweed and yarrow were added to the juice at times, but ribwort was the mainstay. The patient's legs healed and have not needed further treatment.

Julie also uses plantain poultices for the heat and swelling of varicose veins and varicose eczema.

Plantains are great purifiers, with an ability to draw dirt, pus and venom out of wounds. They have even been used to treat blood poisoning and gangrene. A poultice of crushed plantain leaves is the perfect remedy for the skinned knees of childhood, drawing out dirt while soothing and healing.

Abbé Kneipp (1821–97) characterised plantain's healing action thus:

plantain closes the gaping wound with a seam of gold thread; for, just as gold will not admit of rust, so the plantain will not admit of rotting and gangrenous flesh.

These same qualities make plantain useful for treating infections of the teeth and gums. Simply place a wad of plantain leaf against the affected area and back it up by plantain tea or tincture as a mouthwash. Plantain can be used to help relieve toothache until you can get to the dentist.

Plantain has a soothing effect on the mucous membranes of the digestive tract, and has been used successfully for stomach ulcers and irritable bowel complaints. The leaves stop the bleeding too, so are good for ulcerative colitis. The seeds are even more soothing than the leaf, but probably do not stop the bleeding as well.

The seeds can be eaten raw or cooked, and are very rich in vitamin B1. Ground into a meal and mixed with flour they can make a form of bread. The whole seeds can be boiled like sago, and have a pleasant mild flavour, but this is a bit fiddly and time-consuming.

The seed husks swell up and are very absorbent, providing a source of dietary fibre for constipation and other digestive disorders. It is not surprising that the mucilaginous and binding herb psyllium (or isaphagula) is from *Plantago ovata*, a close relative of our plantains and native to the Middle East and India. As well as being anti-diarrhoeal the mucilage in plantain is good for starching clothes.

Ribwort is the best of the plantains for treating coughs, and is recommended for chronic bronchitis as well as other persistent irritable coughs. It helps to bring up old stuck phlegm, and is particularly good for hot, dry coughs.

Greater or hoary plantain, having broader leaves, is better for hot, tired feet or plantar fasciitis. Do as the Native Amerticans did and put the leaves in your shoes; keep there until the leaves dry out and then replace by fresh ones.

Plantain's long history has been benign. One exception came in a case of witchcraft in Scotland. In 1623 Bessie Smith confessed to treating 'heart fevers' by giving 'wayburn leaves' to take for nine mornings, with a charm. But was this worse than using plantain on St John's eve, as everyone did?

It is the best herb for blood poisoning: reducing the swelling and completely healing a limb where poisoning has made amputation imminent.
– Dr Christopher (1976)

Plantago major by Maria Merian (1717)

Ribwort leaf with frost crystals outlining the veins

Harvesting plantain

For first-aid use, plantain leaves can be picked and used whenever needed as they remain green through the year. Crush or chew, then apply. If you live in an area with harsh winters, you can freeze the leaves for winter use. For making a medicine to preserve, gather the leaves during the summer. To dry the leaves, spread them on brown paper or a drying screen in a warm dry place, turning the leaves daily until they are crisp. Discard if they go black.

Harvest the seeds when they are ripe, picking the heads and spreading them on brown paper to dry completely before stripping the seeds off for storage in brown paper bags or in jars.

Leaf in shoe
- plantar fasciitis
- tired feet

Crushed leaf
- insect bites & stings

- allergic rashes
- cuts and wounds
- infected cuts
- bleeding
- mouth ulcers
- boils and ulcers
- burns
- acne rosacea
- shingles

Plantain tea

Use a heaped teaspoonful of **crumbled dry leaf** or a **fresh leaf of plantain** per mugful of boiling water, and leave to infuse for ten minutes.

Dose: Drink a mugful three times a day.

Plantain tea

- coughs
- irritable bowel
- haemorrhoids

Plantain tincture

Pick **fresh plantain leaves** and put them in a blender with enough **vodka** to cover them. Blend to a green mush, and pour into a jar. Put in a cool dark place for a few days, then strain and bottle.

Dose: Half to one teaspoonful three times a day.

Plantain tincture

- coughs
- mild bronchitis
- irritable bowel
- haemorrhoids

Plantain succus

Juice **fresh plantain leaves** and mix the juice with an equal amount of **honey**. Pour into sterilised bottles and store in a cool place.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful as needed for coughs (ribwort is best); 1 teaspoonful 3 times daily for stomach ulcers. Use externally as a dressing for ulcers and other sores.

Plantain succus
• coughs
• sore throats
• mild bronchitis
• irritable bowel
• stomach ulcers

Plantain seed

The seeds and husks can be ground in a coffee grinder before use, or used whole.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful sprinkled on food, once to three times daily.

Seed
• constipation
• irritable bowel

Greater plantain (*Plantago major*) in flower

Ramsons

Allium ursinum

Finding a swathe of ramsons (wild garlic) in a dark wood is one of the joys of early spring, with the bright green leaves and strong garlic smell tempting you to gather for the pot.

This is also a wonderful medicine for the digestive tract, and helps keep the heart and circulation healthy. Ramsons cleanses the body, balancing the gut flora, and is effective in removing infections.

Alliaceae Onion family

Description: A bulb producing a carpet of greenery in damp wooded areas in spring, followed by beautiful white starry flowers in early summer. Up to 30 cm tall.

Habitat: Woodland, stream banks and moist hedgerows.

Distribution: Widely distributed in the British Isles, Europe and Asia.

Related species: There are several other native *Allium* species, but none have the broad leaves of ramsons.

Parts used: Leaves, flowers and sometimes bulbs.

Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.
– Hippocrates (460–377 BC)

Ramsons has been a folk medicine favourite in Europe since the ancient Greeks, its uses in both kitchen and medicine cabinet matching those of its cultivated garlic cousin. Its unusual common name probably comes from an Old English word, *hramson*, which unsurprisingly meant wild garlic; its second Latin name of *ursinum*, or bear, perhaps relating to the smell, seems to have little relation to British experience (though see Mrs Grieve's gripes on the next page!).

You don't find this wonderful herb for sale in a herb or health shop, so you have to harvest your own. Luckily, it is usually abundant where it grows, carpeting woods and dells with its pungent greenery in the early spring.

Ramsons has similar medicinal properties to garlic, with the added benefit of being tolerated well by people who have problems with onions or garlic. We hope you find it as delicious as we do.

Gourmet cooks and posh restaurants extol the piquant flavour of fresh ramsons leaves, but it is also there for you to forage. The leaves can be eaten raw or cooked. Try them chopped and sprinkled on a variety of foods. A bright green garlic butter made from the leaves would be at home on a science fiction set, but is actually really tasty.

The bright white flowers can be used too, and are attractive and flavoursome sprinkled on salads. But note that once the flowers open, the palatability of the leaves decreases as they become harsher-tasting and less full-bodied.

Use ramsons for…

Fresh ramsons eaten in spring is a gentle tonic for the whole body. By ‘cleansing the blood’ it also helps with skin problems. Like ordinary garlic, ramsons improves the circulation and helps protect the heart. Better circulation assists memory and eyesight, and will genrally lift the health.

Ramsons growing near High Force, Teesside in May

Ramsons, the wild Wood Garlic, but for its evil smell would rank among the most beautiful of our British plants … many woods are to be avoided when it is in flower, being so closely carpeted with the plants that every step taken brings out the offensive odour.
– Mrs Grieve (1931)

Continually sickly people … should venerate ramsons like gold. No herb on earth is as effective for cleansing the stomach, intestines and blood.
– Abbé Kuenzle, quoted by Treben (1980)

You can make a poultice for boils and minor cuts by mashing a fresh ramsons leaf to place on them, holding it in place with a sticking plaster. Re-apply a couple of times a day until healed. Ramsons is a good antibacterial and antifungal agent, though not as strong as ordinary garlic.

Ramsons is one of the best medicines for bowel problems. Julie has found in patients that it can settle a digestive tract that has never been quite right since a gut infection. Also, ramsons balances the gut flora, and is beneficial for ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic gastroenteritis, colic and flatulence – in fact, it helps relieve most forms of intestinal unhappiness.

Ramsons is best used as a fresh seasonal food and medicine but can be preserved for later use. Garlic tincture doesn't sound very appealing, however! Many herbalists recommend taking ramsons juice, which is effective, but we'd much rather have a few tablespoons of ramsons pesto or sauce and enjoy taking our medicine as food (recipes below).

Harvesting ramsons

Ramsons leaves can be harvested as soon as they appear in spring, and are at their best before the flowers open. The flowers are tasty, sprinkled on salads and other food. The bulbs can also be eaten, but we prefer to leave them to grow again the next year. Ramsons are locally abundant, so you should be able to harvest and preserve plenty of leaves without needing to disturb the bulbs.

Fresh ramsons leaf
- spring tonic
- skin problems
- IBS
- gas and bloating

• chronic colitis
• ulcerative colitis
• Crohn’s disease

Fresh leaf poultice
• boils
• cuts

Ramsons pesto

Put **ramsons leaves** and enough **olive oil** to cover them in a blender. Blend until smooth. This vivid green sauce can be eaten fresh with pasta just like the more familiar Italian pesto made with basil and garlic. You can alter the taste by adding chopped pine nuts or sunflower seeds and freshly grated pecorino cheese. It is delicious spooned onto savoury foods and can be added to salad dressings. This pesto can be frozen in small batches for use throughout the year.

Ramsons sauce

Another way to preserve **ramsons** is to blend as above, but use 1 part **cider** or **white wine vinegar** to 3 parts **olive oil** as the liquid. The vinegar helps preserve the ramsons, and a jar of this will keep well in the fridge for months if it doesn’t get eaten before then!

Ramsons pesto and sauce
• spring tonic
• skin problems
• IBS
• gas and bloating
• chronic colitis
• ulcerative colitis
• Crohn’s disease

Raspberry

Rubus idaeus

Raspberry leaf tea is well known for strengthening the uterus prior to childbirth, and for relieving painful periods. It is also an effective and soothing remedy for 'flu and fevers, helping reduce the aches and pains that go with them.

This tea is a good source of readily assimilated calcium and other minerals, making it a health-enhancing alternative to regular tea. Raspberries, especially wild ones, are very high in salvestrols, a class of cancer-fighting chemicals.

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: A slender shrub, up to 2m high, with arching stems; less spiny and more delicate than blackberry canes. The leaves are a light green, and silvery underneath. The stems are bare in winter.

Habitat: Wild raspberries are often found growing with brambles along the edges of woods.

Distribution: Found throughout the British Isles and northern Europe, up to the Arctic Circle, and in much of Asia and North America.

Related species: North American red raspberry (*R. strigosus*) is used interchangeably with the European species. In China, Korean bramble (*R. coreanus*) fruit is used as a kidney and liver tonic.

Parts used: Leaves and berries.

Raspberry is a member of the rose family, a plant of the Old World, spreading out to the temperate regions from the Mediterranean. The second part of its name, ‘idaeus’, refers to this ancient origin.

The Greek version of the raspberry legend concerns Ida, daughter of the King of Crete. One day she was looking after her infant, Jupiter, while picking berries on a mountainside. The lusty babe made so much noise that Ida was distracted. When she pricked herself her blood caused what were white berries to turn red. They have remained so ever since – and still grow on the slopes of Mt Ida in modern Crete.

Raspberry was given the common name ‘raspis’, meaning rough or hairy fruit (by contrast with the blackberry), and also ‘hindberry’ because female deer would feed on the leaves, and thereby assist in their own birthing.

The noted animal herbalist Juliette de Baïracli Levy has long advocated dog breeders using raspberry leaf tea, with impressive whelping results throughout the world. She quotes a Romany source: ‘Let all creatures with young, human and animal, take freely of raspberry herb. They will have very easy “times” and will be saved a tremendous amount of suffering.’

Use raspberry for…

The best way to enjoy wild raspberries is to eat them straight off the bush. They may not be as large as the commercial and garden varieties, but the deep, satisfying flavour is special. As the English herbalist John Parkinson wrote in 1629: ‘The berries are eaten in the Summertime, as an afternoones dish, to please the taste of the sicke as well as the sound.’

But it is the leaves rather than the berries that have the most benefit medicinally. The best time to pick them is on a sunny morning after the dew has dried off. Most herbals say drying the leaves is best, but we find the fresh and dried alternatives equally good.

If you are drying the leaves to use later, hang up bunches of the canes tied together with string, or spread the leaves on a drying rack – an airing cupboard is an ideal place. When they are crisp, they can be packed away in brown paper bags or bottles for storage.

Raspberry leaf is astringent, meaning that it tightens and tones tissue. It is high in nutrients, including iron, manganese and calcium.

The leaf tea is mainly used in pregnancy to help ease delivery and reduce pain in labour. Julie drank it when she was pregnant, and while she wouldn’t say labour was easy (the very name means work, after all!) it was not painful. Raspberry leaf continues its work after the baby is born, by helping the uterus return to normal and promoting milk production.

You may find disagreement in various books about how long to use raspberry leaf in pregnancy. Some authors advise taking it throughout while others restrict it to the last two or three months only. It partly depends on the dose, and we suggest you follow what your midwife or herbalist says is best for you personally.

Many herbals recommend using an ounce of dried leaf per pint of water, but this is a very strong brew and isn’t too pleasant to drink. Unless you are trying to stop diarrhoea, this strength isn’t necessary. We think a weaker tea taken more often is a better idea.

As well as pregnancy and for periods, raspberry tea and vinegar can be used to counter anaemia, and to relieve colds, ‘flu and diarrhoea. See the recipes overleaf.

Raspberries are high in vitamin C and other antioxidants. They are also high in a newly discovered class of chemicals called **salvestrols**, which have proven anti-cancer activity.

Professor Gerry Potter, Head of Medicinal Chemistry at De Montfort University and Director of the Cancer Drug Discovery Group, recommends a diet of foods that are naturally high in salvestrols, which includes raspberries and other red and blue berries.

Recent research has found that agro-chemicals inhibit plants from producing salvestrols, so wild or organically grown plants have higher levels. Here's another reason to enjoy your wild raspberries!

Raspberry leaf tea

Pour a cupful of **boiling water** onto 1 rounded tablespoonful of dried **raspberry leaf** or a handful of fresh leaves. Let it brew for 15 minutes, then strain and drink, either hot or cold.

Dosages: For general use, drink 1 cupful one to three times a day.

In the last two/three months of pregnancy and for several weeks after giving birth, drink two cups daily, or as instructed by your herbal practitioner or midwife. To normalise heavy periods, drink 3 cups a day during your period, and 1 cup a day the rest of the month. At the first sign of a cold or 'flu, stop eating for a day or two and drink lots of raspberry leaf tea.

For diarrhoea, make a stronger infusion with 2 to 3 teaspoonfuls of dried leaf per cup of boiling water. Drink 1 cupful three times a day. Children can have a wineglassful, and babies given a teaspoonful.

Raspberry leaf tea

- childbirth
- lactation
- heavy menstruation
- anaemia
- 'flu
- muscle cramps
- osteoporosis
- diarrhoea
- nausea

Other uses for raspberry leaf tea

• as a mouthwash for mouth ulcers and gum problems
• as a gargle for sore throats
• when cool as a soothing eyewash for sore and irritated eyes
• as a healing wash for cuts and abrasions

Raspberry vinegar

Fill a jam jar with freshly picked **raspberries** and pour in enough **cider vinegar** to cover them. Cover the jar and put it in a warm place such as a sunny windowsill, shaking it every few days.

After two weeks the vinegar should be a lovely deep pink. Strain through a jelly bag or fine sieve. If you want a clear vinegar, don't press the pulp – just let the liquid drip out – otherwise squeeze to get the most flavour out of your raspberries, and pour into a sterile bottle.

Dosage: Take 1 teaspoonful every few hours for colds and 'flu.

This rich, sweet-sour vinegar can also be used to bring a touch of summer sunshine to winter salad dressings. It has a wonderful flavour, enjoyed in the best gourmet restaurants – and your own home.

Raspberry vinegar
• colds & 'flu
• sore throats
• digestion
• arthritis
• salad dressing

Raspberry oxymel

Mix equal parts of **honey** and **raspberry vinegar**.

Dosage: For sore throats, use 1 tablespoon as a gargle before swallowing. For a sluggish digestive system, add 1 tablespoon of the oxymel to a mug of hot water, and drink before meals.

Raspberry oxymel

- sore throats
- colds & ‘flu
- sluggish digestion
- arthritis

Red clover

Trifolium pratense

An important nitrogen-fixing forage crop, red clover is also a significant medicinal plant with a long history as a blood cleanser. It is used for chronic constipation, skin complaints, chronic degenerative diseases and bronchitis. It has been included in many anti-cancer formulae, and helps balance hormone levels during the menopause, relieving symptoms such as hot flushes.

Fabaceae (Leguminosae) Pea family

Description: A common perennial with purplish-red flowers and a single pale chevron on the leaves.

Habitat: Grassland, road verges.

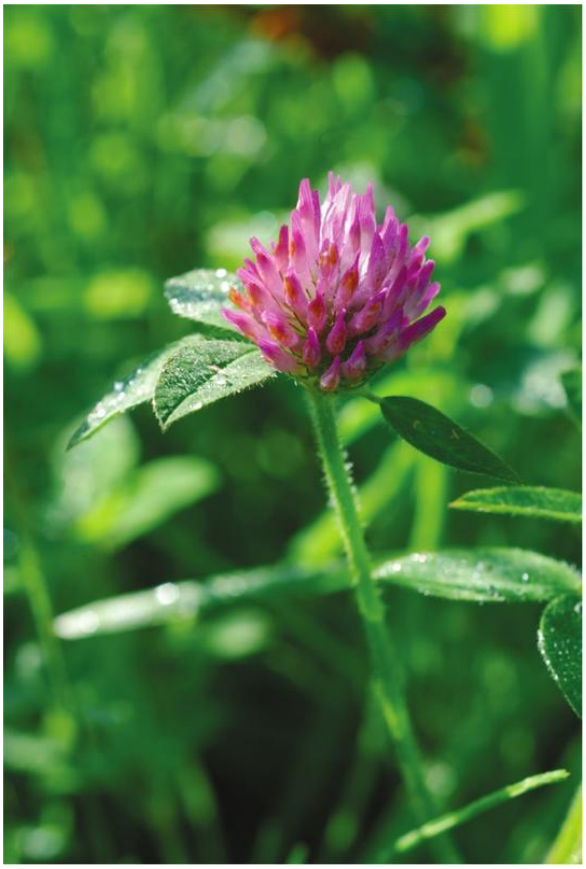
Distribution: Native and also cultivated throughout the British Isles and Europe; naturalised in the Americas, Australia and many other places.

Related species: The other common species is white clover (*T. repens*), with medicinal uses similar to those of red clover. There are over 200 species of clover worldwide.

Parts used: Flower heads with upper leaves, collected in early summer.

Red clover is wonderful for scrofulous and skin diseases, as an antidote to cancer, and for bronchitis and spasmodic affections.

– Dr Christopher (1976)



Clover or trefoil (three leaves) has a sacred past. It had significance for the Druids, and St Patrick was said to have used a clover in the meadow to explain the Trinity to Irish pagans. As befitted a plant of such fortunate lineage clover was worthy, with other holy herbs, to protect the virtuous against dark forces. One old rhyme went (in Sir Walter Scott's 1815 version):

Trefoil, vervain, St John's wort, dill,/Hinder witches of their will.

The oldest form of the name 'clover' we have is Anglo-Saxon *cloeferwort*, the last syllable being a marker of its herbal value (a 'wort' is a medicinal herb). The name may have derived from the Latin *clava* or club, probably the three-knotted club of Hercules; from the fourteenth century clover was the symbol of the card suit 'clubs'.

In Tudor times the plant was called *claver*, which later became *clover*. The Irish national flower, the shamrock, means ‘small clover’, though it’s really an *Oxalis*.

In the Middle Ages legumes, like peas, beans and vetches, were grown as fodder and food crops. From the mid-seventeenth century farmers added red and white clover; only much later did scientists learn why it was so useful: clover fixed organic nitrogen in the soil in its root nodules. Clover remains an excellent hay (to be ‘in clover’ still means to have abundance).

Red clover seldom cures cancer, but it fairly reliably will cause a membrane to grow around the tumor and contain it, which is helpful, especially if followed by surgery. This has especially been observed in breast cancer.
– Wood (2008)

Also, clover is beloved of bees and yields wonderful honey (the white clover is superior), and the white form, with a mass of roots, gives a fine lawn – though clover lawns are currently unfashionable.

In terms of culinary uses, clover leaves and flowers can be eaten in salads, and the seeds soaked and sprouted. Clover wine is well-liked. The dried flowers are mixed with coltsfoot leaves as a herbal tobacco or used as a snuff.

Use red clover for…

The best-known use of all for clover is of course the luck of finding a rare four-leafed one. In some folk traditions, the three leaves represented faith, hope and charity (love), and the fourth was God's grace; in everyday terms, it meant luck. Nowadays you can order a plastic-sealed lucky four-leaved clover online (some sites offer organically grown ones). Who gets the luck, one wonders – probably the seller.

Your luck may be more certain if you use clover herbally. Red clover works gently to improve elimination over a wide front, helping the body rid itself of toxins – it can help increase the flow of urine, move mucus out of the lungs, increase the flow of bile and act as a gentle laxative.

This slow and steady action plus its high content of trace minerals means that red clover is effective for a wide range of health problems, and is gentle enough for children. Clover is most effective when taken consistently for several months for chronic conditions such as skin problems.

Clover's ability to remove waste products, along with a capacity to prevent the formation of abnormal cells, underlies its popular reputation for treating cancers, including breast, prostate and lymphatic forms. As with any claims for treating cancer, this has been controversial. One US

pioneer of plant-based cancer remedies, Harry Hoxsey, had red clover as the main herb in his formula, and it has been used in many others.

Red clover's soothing expectorant effect is beneficial in treatments for coughs and bronchitis, and it remains official in the *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia* as an anti-inflammatory.

Red clover's ability to alleviate menopausal symptoms is related to its flavonoid content. Flavonoids are oestrogen-like plant chemicals (or phyto-oestrogens) that help maintain normal oestrogen levels during menopause, providing relief for hot flushes. However, red clover is safe to use and beneficial in cases of breast cancer through reduction of high oestrogen levels (see box).

Red clover itself does not have a blood-thinning effect but the coumarin it contains can convert to dicoumarol, which is a blood thinner, if the plants ferment on drying. If dried quickly, this will not occur, but clover should not be used in quantity by anyone taking blood-thinning medication.

Phyto-oestrogens

Phyto-oestrogens can exert an oestrogenic effect in the body, which is useful in the menopause when oestrogen levels are low. What is less well known is the fact that they can also exert an anti-oestrogenic effect in the body.

This is because phyto-oestrogens have a weaker oestrogenic effect than oestrogens produced by the body, and both bind to oestrogen receptor sites. If oestrogen levels are high, the weaker plant oestrogens reduce the overall oestrogenic effect, which is one reason why red clover is beneficial in breast cancer treatment.

Harvesting red clover

Pick the flowers and top leaves in early summer (the flowers growing in autumn are not as sweet) when the morning dew has dried off. Choose newly opened pink flowers. Dry thoroughly, spreading them out on paper or trays, no more than one flowerhead deep, in a warm dry place away from direct sunlight. When fully dried they are crumbly to the touch. Store in glass bottles away from the light to maintain the red colour.

Red clover tea

Use 1 or 2 heaped teaspoons of dried red clover flowers per cup or mug of boiling water and allow to infuse for ten minutes. Strain and drink.

Dose: 3 or 4 cups a day. Can be taken by children. For chronic toxicity, constipation and skin problems this tea needs to be taken consistently over a period of five or six weeks, as the effect is cumulative. To help with hot flushes, it is best drunk cold at the first onset of a flush.

Red clover tea

- chronic constipation
- acne
- eczema
- psoriasis
- swollen glands
- hot flushes
- coughs
- bronchitis

Red clover and curled dock tincture

Put roughly equal amounts of **red clover blossom** and chopped **curled dock root** in a jar, and pour in enough **vodka** to cover the herbs. Leave in a dark place for two weeks, then strain. Pour the liquid into clean bottles and label.

Dose: Half a teaspoon 2 to 3 times daily.

Red clover & curled dock tincture

- chronic constipation
- toxicity
- acne

- eczema
- psoriasis
- swollen glands

Red poppies

Red poppy

Papaver rhoeas

Red poppy is an archetypal weed of summer, flowering in profusion on disturbed soil and among unsprayed crops. Unwanted by farmers, it has long been a useful country herbal remedy. Red poppy is soothing and sedative, relieves pain and helps sleep, but without the narcotic effects of its relative, the opium poppy.

Papaveraceae Poppy family

Description: An annual with bright red flowers, growing to about 70cm. Lasts most of the summer.

Habitat: Arable land and other disturbed ground.

Distribution: Found in most of Britain and Ireland apart from mountainous areas.

Related species: Long-headed poppy (*P. dubium*) is very similar but has paler petals and long seed capsules. Rough poppy (*P. hybridum*) and prickly poppy (*P. argemone*) both have bristly seed capsules and are scarce. Opium poppy (*P. somniferum*) has grey–green leaves and the flowers are usually pale lilac with darker centres.

Parts used: Flowers and seeds, harvested in summer.

The poppy has always had a powerful hold on human imagination, and not just in opium dreams. Everybody in Britain knows ‘poppy day’, held

in memory of the sacrifice made by millions in the First World War and since. Yet poppy is also symbolically the plant of forgetfulness and sleep. In some cultures it has been a plant of fertility, with its vast production of seeds and vivid red petals a reminder of the blood of life and of war, as also of renewal and rebirth.

As befits a plant of life, death, blood, dream and sleep, poppy coincides with man's many civilisations, and its own history is intertwined in them. It is as old as agriculture itself, growing in and alongside the earliest grain crops.

Yet British fields have not always been scarlet with poppies as the grain ripens through a hot summer. It's well within memory that the fields and hedgerows lacked virtually any poppies and other once common wild plants. Why? Because we have endured a fertiliser, herbicide and insecticide bombardment of heroic proportions. The pace has only dropped in the past twenty to thirty years. Policy-makers have now rediscovered the value of leaving land fallow and of field margins, and have paid farmers to do it. Presto! the poppies have duly come back, especially where fields have been left unsprayed.

One of poppy's characteristics is that it looks and feels fragile, its stem being thin and wobbly, its gossamer-fine petals falling off to the touch, whereas in reality it is tailor-made for survival. Its flowering season is long, through the summer. Calculations have shown that each mature plant produces some 17,000 tiny seeds a year, which can sit in a state of dormancy for fifty and more years, awaiting the right conditions.

A change such as new ploughing or deep trenches being dug will release forgotten poppy seeds and give them the disturbed ground they need to flourish *en masse*. Hence the shock when poppies suddenly flowered amid the killing fields of the Great War. This stark contrast led to a Canadian medical orderly, John McCrae, finding time between his terrible duties at Ypres in 1915 to write the poem 'In Flanders Fields'. He posted it to a magazine in London. It was printed and became immensely popular worldwide.

Boil poppy heads in ale; let the patient drink it, and he will sleep.
– The Physicians of Myddfai (13th century)

The Flowers cool, and asswage Pain, and dispose to Sleep….
– Pechey (1707)

The poem and its powerful link to an archetypal plant of war inspired the British Legion (now the Royal British Legion) after the armistice to take up the call of remembrance. Since then, on Remembrance Day each 11th of November, solemn services are held for the fallen of all wars. Participants and many besides all wear red poppies made of paper.

It is worth underlining here that our focus is on the red poppy and not the opium poppy. Opium poppies have been grown domestically in England for millennia, and 150 years ago went into laudanum (a tincture in

alcohol) and paregoric elixir (a camphorated extract). Modern pain-relieving medications including morphine and codeine are derived from opium poppy, but are prescription-only.

Use red poppy for…

Red poppy doesn't have the dangerous reputation of its infamous cousin. Taking red poppy herbally is non-addictive and generally safe: its weak opiates work well medicinally but are not in strong enough concentration to do harm.

Red poppy has long been familiar in British country traditions. For example, the petals were collected as a colouring agent for wines and other herbal remedies. Indeed, the petals are still used to add colour to sweets and some herbal teas.

Red poppy petals can be added to summer salads for brightness, and the seeds collected as a topping for bread and to use in cooking. The seeds have mild sedative qualities.

Our glycerite recipe is good for coughs, nervous digestion, anxiety and insomnia. It is gentle and safe for children who are over-excited and cannot sleep. The petals can also be made into a tincture that will tackle similar conditions.

In general, red poppy acts as a mild sedative that also promotes perspiration, soothes respiratory passages and calms the system. Being slightly astringent, it helps remove excess mucus and improves the digestion. It soothes itchy or sore throats and hacking coughs. For insomnia, it combines well with lime blossom, wood betony and vervain, and can also be used with hops and wild lettuce.

Red poppy is a great plant of myth and archetype, with medicinal virtues on a more humble scale for the home medicine cabinet.

Red poppy glycerite

Fill a jar about three-quarters full of a mixture of 60% **vegetable glycerine** and 40% **water**. Add **poppy petals** to fill the jar, stirring so

that the petals are covered in the glycerine mixture. Put the lid on the jar and place it in a sunny spot in the garden or on a window sill.

One of the little plastic inserts used by jam makers to keep the material pushed down under the surface of the liquid is handy, but if you don't have one just shake the jar or stir the contents every day. This will keep the petals from floating on the top. Once the petals have faded to white, usually after only a few days, they can be removed and fresh ones added over the summer until your liquid is a rich deep red colour. It can then be strained, bottled and labelled. Your glycerite should keep well in a cool dark place until next year when you can make a fresh batch.

The glycerite is particularly good for children, as it doesn't contain alcohol and they will like the sweet taste. It is also good for coughs and irritable or nervous digestive tracts.

Red poppy glycerite
- insomnia
- irritable cough
- nervous digestion
- IBS
- headache
- over-excitability
- anxiety
- nervousness

Red poppy tincture

Fill a jar with **fresh poppy petals**, then top it up with **vodka**.
Put the lid on and shake well, adding a little more vodka if needed to fill the jar. Place the jar in a cool dark place – a cupboard is perfect – for two weeks, then strain and bottle.

The alcohol in a tincture makes it more warming and dispersing. While the uses are much the same as for the glycerite, the tincture is probably better for pain as it is more rapidly absorbed and has a quicker effect.

You can also combine your tincture and glycerite half and half, reducing the sweetness of the glycerite and making the tincture taste better.

Red poppy tincture

- insomnia
- nervous digestion
- IBS
- headache
- over-excitability
- anxiety
- nervousness

Rosebay willowherb

Rosebay willowherb, Fireweed

Chamerion angustifolium syn. *Epilobium angustifolium, Chamaenerion angustifolium*

This beautiful native plant is stunning enough to be grown in any garden and yet is considered a weed. It has not been used much in medicine in recent years but was a favourite of the American Eclectic physicians in treating diarrhoea and typhoid. Its soothing, astringent and tonic action is wonderful for all sorts of intestinal irritation, and it makes a good mouthwash.

Onagraceae Willowherb family

Description: A tall 1.5m perennial, with stunning magenta flower spikes in summer and into autumn.

Habitat: Heaths, mountains, forest clearings, waste ground and railway embankments.

Distribution: Throughout the British Isles, and across Europe, Asia and North America; also parts of north Africa.

Related species: Rosebay willowherb is closely related to other willowherbs in the *Epilobium* genus: see page 186.

Parts used: Flower spikes and leaves, harvested in summer.

Despite all the exotic tales of eating rosebay willow-herb I have been unable to make it palatable. It is far too bitter to enjoy as any kind of vegetable.

– Phillips (1983)

Rosebay willowherb is one of our largest and most beautiful wildflowers. In North America, it is called fireweed because of its tendency to spring up as an early pioneer on burnt land. It is rarely grown in gardens these days, except for the rare white form.

Julie remembers the excitement of seeing her first fireweed as she and her parents drove north on the Alaska Highway, when she was eleven. We've heard of one American herbalist who cheers every time she sees fireweed by the roadside, sometimes drawing strange looks. It's a plant that brings joy just by being there.

Rosebay willowherb is one of the first plants to appear whenever the earth is scarred. In Second World War Britain, it sprang up on bomb sites in London and elsewhere, rising like a phoenix from the ashes and rubble (its seeds last for years in a dormant state). In Clydebank, Scotland, it colonised the bombed Singer sewing machine factory site and was nicknamed Singerweed.

The 'narrow leaves' (the English version of *angustifolium*) of the plant do resemble willow enough to earn its common name, but there is no real connection, medicinal or otherwise.

In Russia, the leaves are drunk as a tea called *kapoori*, while in Alaska the flowers are a valuable source of nectar for honey, and are made into jellies and syrups. This honey is said to be the most northerly available anywhere.

Various groups of native North Americans have used rosebay as a food plant. Supposedly the young shoots boiled in the spring taste like asparagus, but we haven't tried it, and 'wild food' expert Roger Phillips is not a fan, as the attached quotation suggests.

Use rosebay for…

The plant's astringency, however, works well in our syrup recipe, which is good for diarrhoea and a pleasant remedy for children (and adults) who

are suffering digestive upsets.

That it has not attained prominence as a remedy is not the fault of the plant, for in certain cases of summer bowel troubles it is without an equal.
– *King's American Dispensatory* (1898)

[Rosebay] *Cleanses old patterns from the body and stimulates renewal of energies on all levels of being; attracts restorative healing energy from our surroundings.*
– Rudd (1998)

The fine, downy seeds of rosebay willowherb blow far and wide on the wind.

America's Eclectic doctors of a century and more ago favoured rosebay willowherb for all kinds of diarrhoea and enteritis, cholera infantum or typhoid dysentery. *King's American Dispensatory* (1898) said of one of the leading Eclectics: 'With Prof. Scudder, infusion of epilobium was a favorite remedy to correct and restrain the diarrhoea of typhoid or enteric

fever.' The Eclectics also used the leaf infusion for uterine bleeding and heavy periods, and the fresh leaves as a poultice for 'foul and indolent ulcers'. We have found it works well for mouth ulcers.

Modern American herbalist David Winston uses rosebay to treat candida overgrowth.

Several flower essence makers produce a fireweed essence, saying it works to connect us to the healing energies of nature and the earth. They believe it helps in resolving problems concerning change and in shifting stagnant energy patterns. It is used both for a 'burnt-out' feeling and for shock and trauma. If you'd like to try making your own essence, follow the instructions given on page 154 for self-heal essence.

Rosebay willowherb leaf poultice

The fresh leaves can be crushed and applied as a poultice to help minor wounds heal. Hold the leaves on with a plaster, and change for fresh crushed leaves a couple of times a day until healed. The early American Eclectic doctors found it effective for old ulcers.

Rosebay poultice
- ulcers
- minor wounds

Rosebay willowherb tea

The leaves can be harvested in the spring or while the plant is in flower in the summer, and dried for use throughout the year. To dry, spread the leaves on paper in a shady place, turning them occasionally until crisp.

Use 3 or 4 **leaves** per cup of **boiling water** and infuse for about 5 minutes. Drink frequently for diarrhoea, or use as a substitute for ordinary tea.

Can be used as a mouthwash for mouth ulcers and a gargle for sore throats.

Rosebay leaf tea
- digestion

• diarrhoea
• IBS
• heavy periods
• mouth ulcers
• sore throats
• prostate problems

Rosebay willowherb syrup

20 flower heads
500ml water

Bring to the boil and simmer until the colour leaves the blossoms, in about 5–10 minutes. Strain the juice, return to the pot.

Add **100g sugar** to the 400ml or so of fluid, and **juice of a lemon**.

This turns the pale colour a bright pink, almost like the blossoms you start with. Boil for 5 minutes, allow to cool a little, then bottle and label.

It will keep in the fridge for a few months.

This is a pleasant remedy for childhood diarrhoea, and can be used for any case of intestinal irritation associated with loose bowels.

Dose: A dessertspoonful for children and a tablespoonful for adults, every few hours as needed.

Rosebay syrup
• diarrhoea
• loose bowels
• childhood diarrhoea

This close-up of the flowers of self-heal helps us see how it came by some of its old names and uses. In medieval Europe, how a plant looked, or God's 'signature', indicated how it should be used medicinally. Face-on, the corolla of self-heal resembles an open mouth with swollen glands, which suggested its value for treatment of throat problems. In profile, there is a likeness to a bill

hook, giving a signature for treatment of cuts and wounds made by a sharp tool. Hence the old common names sicklewort, hook heal and carpenter's herb.

Self-heal

Prunella vulgaris

Also called all-heal, self-heal was mentioned in Chinese medical literature of the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 23), and is still used in Traditional Chinese Medicine. It was popular for centuries in Europe as a wound herb and for throat problems.

Self-heal has gained recent respect for its antiviral qualities. Effective for feverish colds and 'flu, it has been proposed for treating herpes and AIDS, and is an underrated liver, gallbladder and thyroid remedy.

Lamiaceae (Labiatae) Deadnettle family

Description: A creeping perennial with downy leaves and violet flowers, reaching 30cm.

Habitat: Lawns, meadows and woods.

Distribution: Common throughout the British Isles, and found virtually worldwide.

Related species: Cut-leaved self-heal (*P. laciniata*) has creamy white flowers and is found on dry lime soils.

Parts used: Flowers and leaves, dry flower spikes.

As you would expect from a plant known as all-heal, self-heal has a wide range of medicinal actions. It is, however, underused in contemporary western herbal medicine.

Self-heal has a long history of western folk use. One name it acquired was ‘touch and heal’, indicating its value as first aid for cuts and wounds. It was also found to staunch bleeding and help knit a wound together. Taken internally as a tea, it treated fevers, diarrhoea and internal bleeding.

The Latin name *Prunella* was given by Linnaeus to *Brunella*, the German name of the plant. This reflected its use for ‘die Braüne’ or quinsy, meaning a throat abscess. A self-heal tea was taken internally, and a self-heal mouthwash and gargle used to treat a wide range of mouth and throat problems.

In the European tradition the plant is picked just before or while flowering, but in China the flower tops are collected in late summer when they are starting to wither. This variation in time of harvesting, along with regional variations in the plant’s chemistry, could explain the different uses of self-heal in the two traditions.

In Chinese medicine, self-heal is given for ascending liver fire and liver deficiency. It clears liver congestion and stagnation and brightens the eyes, which are regarded as linked to the liver. In common with European use, it is said to lessen heat and dissipate nodules, particularly in the neck, such as scrofula, lipoma, swollen glands and goitre.

Use self-heal for…

Julie has always used self-heal in her practice, mainly for treating ’flu and hot flushes. We knew we needed to take a deeper look at this plant when it seeded itself with exuberance all over our garden while we were writing this book – it seemed to be trying to tell us something. The more we thought about and used self-heal, the more impressed we became.

Recent studies have shown self-heal to be an effective remedy for herpes. If we look back at the old herbals, we see this is not new. In 1640, John

Parkinson wrote that self-heal ‘juice mixed with a little Hony of Roses, clenseth and healeth all ulcers and sores in the mouth and throate, and those also in the secret parts’. We know today that both roses and self-heal have antiviral properties.

To be short, it serveth for the same that Bugle [Ajuga reptans] *doth, and in the world there are not two better wound herbs, as hath bin often proved.*
– Gerard (1597)

… the Proverbe of the Germans, French and others,… is no lesse verified … that he needeth neither Physition nor Chirugion, that hath Selfeheale and Sanicle [Sanicula europeaea] *by him to helpe himselfe.*
– Parkinson (1640)

Self-heal ready for picking: the fresh flower in European medicine

Self-heal is a good remedy for ’flu and fevers because it combines cooling, immune-stimulating and antiviral qualities. It has been found to be effective against a broad range of bacteria, including *Mycobacterium tuberculi*, which causes tuberculosis.

The old use for goitre ties in with American herbalist James Duke's research on self-heal. He found it to be among the most effective herbs for hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid), which often leads to a goitre formation. He has also confirmed that self-heal treats Graves' disease and other hyperactive thyroid conditions. This means its effect is amphoteric, that is, it normalises function by stimulating an underactive gland or reducing overactivity.

The dried flower in Chinese medicine.

Self-heal is high on Duke's list of plants with marked antioxidant activity. Studies show that self-heal has strong immune-stimulatory effects, and calms inflammatory and allergic responses. In preventing viruses from replicating, it shows promise in the treatment of AIDS. It is also used for diabetes and high blood pressure.

Self-heal tea

For tea, we prefer to harvest the flower spikes when they mature and are turning brown, drying naturally on the plant. You can shake out any ripe

seeds to sow, ensuring a supply of plants for the years ahead.

Use about two **flower spikes** per mug of **boiling water** and infuse for 5 to 10 minutes. Drink freely. For hot flushes, it is best drunk cool. It can be used as a mouthwash and gargle for mouth ulcers and sore throats.

Self-heal tea
- general well-being
- fevers
- ‘flu & viral infections
- mouth ulcers
- thyroid disorders
- throat problems

Self-heal infused oil

Fill a jar with **fresh self-heal blossoms and leaves**. Pour **olive oil** in to fill the jar, stirring as you do so to allow air bubbles to escape. Cover the jar with a piece of cloth held on with a rubber band – this will allow any moisture to evaporate. Place the jar on a sunny window sill.

Check the jar every few days, and if necessary push the plant material back down under the surface of the oil. After two to four weeks the colour will have drained out of the plants. Strain off the oil. Allow it to

settle, so that any water will sink to the bottom, then pour the oil carefully into bottles and label. This oil will keep for several years, but it is best to make a fresh batch every summer if you can.

Self-heal cold infusion
• hot flushes

Self-heal cream

To make a cream, you will be using some of the **self-heal oil** you have made, and combining it with a strong **self-heal tea**. This cream recipe can be used for other herbs or combinations of herbs too.

50ml self-heal oil
15g beeswax
50ml self-heal tea

Put the oil and beeswax in one bowl and the tea in another, and stand them both in a large pan of hot water. Heat until the beeswax melts. It is important that they are both the same temperature. Slowly pour the tea into the oil mixture while beating with an electric mixer set at the slowest speed. If you want, you can add a few drops of **self-heal stock essence** (instructions on next page). Once all the oil is mixed in and the mixture has emulsified and thickened, pour the cream into clean jars. Once set, label and store in a cool place or in the fridge.

Self-heal oil and cream
• cuts
• sores
• wounds
• aches and pains
• swellings in the throat

Self-heal flower essence

To make the flower essence, find a patch of self-heal growing in a peaceful sunny spot. Just sit near the plants for a while until you feel relaxed and at peace with the plants and the place. Because flower essences are based on the vibrational energy of a plant rather than its chemistry, your intention is important.

When you are ready, place a small clear glass bowl on the ground near the plants. Fill it with about a cupful of **rain water or spring water**, then pick enough **flowers** from nearby to cover the surface of the water. Leave them there for an hour or two – you can relax nearby or go for a walk while they infuse. The water will still look clear, but the flowers may have wilted. Use a twig to lift them carefully out of the water, and then pour the water into a bottle that is half full of **brandy**. This is called your mother essence. You can use any size of bottle you like, but a 200ml blue glass bottle works well, and it may be easier to fill if you make use of a funnel. If there is any water left over, you can drink it.

To use your essence, put three drops of mother essence in a 30ml dropper bottle filled with brandy. Using this stock bottle, you can:

- put 20 drops in the bath, then soak for at least twenty minutes.
- rub directly on the skin, or mix into creams.
- put a few drops in a glass or bottle of water and sip during the day.

• make a dosage bottle to carry around with you, by putting three drops of stock essence into a dropper bottle containing a 50/50 brandy and water mix or pure distilled rosewater. Use several drops directly under the tongue as often as you feel you need it, or at least twice daily.

Self-heal essence reminds us that all healing is self-healing, and is valuable if you are ill and don't know where to turn for help. It will help you choose the therapies that will be beneficial, and enkindle your own innate healing energy. It can be used alongside any other form of treatment to enhance its effectiveness and benefits without risk of negative interaction. Self-heal doesn't just work on a physical level, but will support the mental and emotional aspects of healing. It also serves to calm and centre the spirit, benefiting meditation and prayer.

Flower essence
• self-healing
• motivation
• inner direction
• transformation

Shepherd’s purse

Capsella bursa-pastoris

Shepherd’s purse stops bleeding of all sorts from nosebleeds to blood in the urine. It was used in First World War battles to staunch bleeding from wounds when ergot, an effective but more dangerous remedy, was not available.

Shepherd’s purse also has an amazing ability to correct prolapses, especially of the uterus but also of the bladder, moving the organs back into their correct position.

Brassicaceae (Cruciferae) Cabbage family

Description: Most easily recognised by its heart-shaped seed pods, this is a small annual with a rosette of slightly hairy, lobed leaves and tiny white flowers.

Habitat: Cultivated and disturbed ground.

Distribution: Widespread throughout the British Isles. Native to Europe and Asia but naturalised in North America and other temperate regions.

Related species: There are several other plants in the genus. Pink shepherd’s purse (*C. rubella*) has pink flowers and is occasionally found in the British Isles.

Parts used: Above-ground parts.

Contraindications Avoid taking shepherd’s purse internally during pregnancy because it can stimulate uterine contractions.

This common little herb, which most people know as a weed if at all, has an ancient history of herbal use, suggested in its beautiful Latin name. The plant’s seed cases are said to resemble the heart-shaped satchels once worn on men’s belts, whether shepherds or not.

Use shepherd’s purse for…

The aerial parts of shepherd’s purse are all used herbally. Externally, it has been found excellent and safe in treating rheumatic aches and pains,

and for ecchymosis, ie bleeding beneath the skin. Taken internally for kidney and bladder irritation, it is particularly good for mucus in the urine.

Less well known is its ability to treat prolapses. Julie had first-hand experience when she suffered a uterine prolapse. Within an hour of taking shepherd’s purse tincture she could feel the uterus moving back into place, and three hours later the discomfort was mostly gone. She was back to normal in three days with the tincture, helped by yoga and reflexology.

Another case history involved a patient who had great discomfort and a bulging on the side of her vulva. She went to the nurse at the doctor’s surgery, who examined her and said she had a uterine prolapse. The patient started taking shepherd’s purse, and felt a fairly rapid

improvement. Six days later, her GP examined her again and said the nurse must have made a mistake because the patient didn't have a prolapse at all.

Perhaps the most important cruciferous plant with medicinal use, it has been known as a haemostatic for centuries and evidence of its use has been found at Neolithic sites, probably as condiment and vegetable as much as medication.
– Barker (2001)

Shepherd's purse also works for bladder prolapse. A woman had been diagnosed with this condition, which was causing her pain and discomfort. She didn't want surgery, so came to see Julie.

The formula Julie gave was shepherd's purse and a bladder tea of uva ursi, couch grass, buchu, corn-silk and horsetail. To support this, the patient began Pilates and did Kegel, ie pelvic floor, exercises. After a month she felt much better, and her doctor was amazed. Her urine had cleared. Two months later there were no signs of any problem and she felt fantastic.

Illustration of shepherd’s purse from *Theatrum Botanicum* by John Parkinson, published in 1640

Shepherd’s purse has small white flowers, which are quickly followed by the plant’s signature heart-shaped pods.

Shepherd’s purse has been used during childbirth to stimulate uterine contractions and reduce postpartum bleeding.

For high blood pressure, shepherd’s purse combines well with hawthorn and lime blossom. Mix the tinctures together, using 50ml hawthorn, 30ml lime blossom and 20ml shepherd’s purse. Take 20 drops in a little water or juice twice a day.

During the First World War in Germany shepherd’s purse was used as a less toxic substitute for ergot to stop bleeding.

One of Julie’s patients complained of blood in his urine. The man’s GP had found that the blood was coming from weak blood vessels in his

prostate. Shepherd’s purse soon stopped the bleeding, and he then took bilberry to strengthen the blood vessels. He occasionally needed to take shepherd’s purse over the next year, but had no later bleeding problem.

Shepherd’s purse puts out flowers and seeds virtually all year round. It is best picked in the summer for making a tincture, but can be used fresh at any time. The leaves are tastiest before the flowers appear and can be eaten in salads; they are rich in vitamins A, B and C. The seedpods can be used chopped up in soups and stews for their peppery taste. In Japan, shepherd’s purse is grown as a vegetable and to flavour rice.

Because the flowering plant has a rather unpleasant taste, we prefer the tincture form (where a small dose is sufficient) rather than as an infusion or decoction, although these will work perfectly well too.

Fresh shepherd’s purse plant

- cuts
- nosebleeds
- rheumatism
- bleeding under skin

When all thoughts
Are exhausted
I slip into the woods
And gather
A pile of shepherd’s purse.

Like the little stream
Making its way
Through the mossy crevices

I, too, quietly
Turn clear and transparent.

Zen Master Ryokan (1758–1831)

Shepherd's purse tincture

Pick **shepherd's purse** while it is flowering, preferably in the summer. Fill a jar with the herb, then pour on **vodka** until it is covered. Put the jar away in a cool dark cupboard for a month, shaking the jar daily or as frequently as you can remember to do it. Strain off the liquid, pour it into a bottle and label.

Dose: For bleeding, take half a teaspoonful three times a day until the bleeding stops and then discontinue. For prolapse, 5 drops three times a day in a little water is usually sufficient. Continue taking it for a few days after everything has moved back into place.

Shepherd's purse tincture
- bleeding
- heavy periods
- prolapses
- blood in urine
- wounds
- haemorrhoids

Formula for high blood pressure

Combine tinctures: 2 parts **shepherd's purse**, 3 parts **lime blossom** and 5 parts **hawthorn berry**.

Dose: 20 drops twice daily in water.

Combined with hawthorn and lime blossom
- high blood pressure

St John’s wort

Hypericum perforatum

St John’s wort has become well known as a herb for treating depression and SAD, but it is far more than that. An antiseptic wound herb of ancient repute, it was the main plant of St John, the sun herb of midsummer and a protector against evil and unseen influences. In modern terms, it strengthens the nervous system and the digestion, protects the liver, is antiviral and reduces pain; it is a plant for support through life-cycle changes.

Hypericaceae St John’s wort family

Description: A mid-sized perennial with yellow flowers. It is distinguished from other species of *Hypericum* by the ‘perforations’ in the leaf, which are actually oil glands.

Habitat: Road verges, hedge banks, rough grassland, meadows and open woodland.

Distribution: Found throughout the British Isles, but rarer north of the Solway Firth. An introduced weed in North America and Australasia.

Related species: There are several other native species of St John’s wort, but they are not as good medicinally, so check for the ‘perforations’ in the leaf by holding one up to the sun.

Parts used: Flowering tops.

The protecting power of St John's wort derives from a powerful mix of observed herbal benefits and the plant's part in the Christian adaptation of older midsummer sun and fire 'pagan' ceremonies.

Its Latin name *Hypericum* gives us clues about the takeover of one form of sun-magic by another. The *hyper-ikon* was a herb placed above St John's image, or painted icon; by extension, it meant power over ghosts or invisible bad spirits. It was particularly important to invoke the plant's help on St John's eve against witchcraft or diabolic influences (see panel on page 161).

St John's wort was a powerful sun herb to dispel darkness, and it had the 'signatures' to prove it. The so-called 'holes' in the leaves, the *perforata* of the Latin name, were emblematic of St John's holy wounds and martyrdom, along with the red 'blood' of the plant's extract. Scientists now know the holes to be resinous glands of hypericin and other active compounds. The cross formed by the leaves, seen from above, was also symbolic of the plant's power.

The sun is said to control the solar (sun) plexus in the body. In yogic systems this is a centre of protective energy that is ruled by the yellow part of the spectrum. This affinity of St John's wort with the solar plexus extends to the plant's use in treating the digestive and nervous systems. It is also taken for life-cycle conditions, such as bedwetting in the young, menstrual problems and menopause. The solar plexus governs 'gut instinct' and life's unseen influences – again leading us to protection.

This may sound rather esoteric, but we have certainly found for ourselves that the actual time of picking St John's wort flowers does matter in a practical sense.

We once gathered it on impulse on a summer evening while driving to a party in north Norfolk. We knew we should harvest in the middle of the day, but thought we'd try anyway. We put our beautiful yellow flowers into olive oil on arriving home, and placed the jar on a south-facing windowsill to infuse. Nothing happened. That jar was in the sun for months, but never turned red.

On the other hand, some of the best St John's wort oil we've ever made was on a visit to Italy. In Ostia Antica, the ancient harbour town for Rome, there were many interesting plants, including St John's wort, which was growing only among the ruined temples.

It was actually St John's day, 24 June, and very hot. We picked enough flowers to make a small jar of oil and infused it on our friend's balcony in Rome. Within hours it was a wonderful deep red colour.

Use St John's wort for…

What we find interesting is that modern uses of the plant, as we will outline, differ so much from the more traditional uses. Look at Parkinson's list of its benefits (right): few herbalists will now use St John's wort to dissolve tumours. Mrs Grieve, writing in 1931, says it is good for pulmonary complaints, bladder problems, diarrhoea, jaundice and nervous depression, among others.

No mention there of a modern and effective use of St John's wort for what we now call seasonal affective disorder (SAD), where people feel low and depressed in the dark months of northern European winters. A spoonful of home-made St John's wort tincture will light you up inside with a warm glow.

When the light shines through the leaves of perforate St John's wort, the oil glands look like holes (hence *perforatum* in the name). There are ten times more glands in the flowers than the leaves or stems.

S. Iohns *wort is as singular a wound herbe as any other whatsoever, eyther for inward wounds, hurts or bruises, to be boyled in wine and drunke, or prepared into oyle or oyntment, bathe or lotion outwardly… it hath power to open obstructions, to dissolve tumours, to consolidate or soder the lips of wounds, and to strengthen the parts that are weake and feeble.*
– Parkinson (1640)

Caution: Do not take St John's wort alongside antidepressant medication without the supervision of a herbal or medical practitioner. Seek professional advice before taking

the herb if you are on any medication, including the contraceptive pill, or are pregnant.

St John’s wort’s reputation for helping lift the darkness of depression has grown considerably. This use of the herb has been well researched in the last twenty years and has stimulated a surge in sales of St John’s wort products. It is known that hypericin interferes with monoamine oxidase (MAO), which contributes to depression. Pharmaceutical products also act as MAO inhibitors, but St John’s wort is a slow treatment, and, crucially, has few side effects.

St John’s wort growing along a Norfolk lane, St John’s day, 24 June

Taking the plant as a flower essence or tincture will help in improving sleep quality, an important issue in depression. We also give a sleep pillow recipe.

St John’s wort treatment has been officially recognised in Germany since 1984 as effective for mild to moderate depression. When the protocol

was publicised, St John's wort products soon outsold Prozac by a factor of seven to one.

A 'modern' way of looking at depression has some interesting precursors. One example is an early nineteenth-century verse by Alfred Lear Huxford; this links a ceremonial use of St John's wort leaves bound to the forehead and the relief of 'dark thoughts':

So thus about her brow/ They bound Hypericum, *whose potent leaves/ Have sovereign powers o'er all the sullen fits/ And cheerless fancies that besiege the mind;/ Banishing ever, to their native night/ Dark thoughts, and causing to spring up within/ The heart distress'd, a glow of gladdening hope,/ And rainbow visions of kind destiny.*

If you change the world-view from religious to scientific, from old 'superstition' to modern 'rationalism', is it really so far from fear of possession by evil spirits to modern clinical depression? Perhaps, like great literature, our major herbs adapt to the neuroses and psychic needs of the time; St John's wort has done this beautifully. However, it would not be true to say the herb has no side effects at all. One, which is sometimes experienced among the fair-skinned, is to make them more sensitive to the sun. Care is needed if you burn easily, and the herb should be avoided if you need to be out in the sun and in danger of burning.

This proneness to sunburn extends to cattle. They are liable to gorge on the plant and can die, which is why US law has proscribed as noxious *H. perforatum*, the introduced St John's wort, known there as Klamath weed.

It was also an unwelcome chance arrival in Australasia and South Africa in the nineteenth century. Spreading by seeds as well as active vegetative roots, it quickly overtakes native vegetation and becomes a problem for livestock.

In the doctrine of signatures yellow-coloured herbs are often associated with the liver and an ability to treat jaundice. This can be unfounded, but

St John’s wort is a case in point, working to relieve liver tension and harmonising the action of the liver with other digestive organs.

Its action is gently decongesting, strengthening both liver and gallbladder. But because St John’s wort helps the liver break down and get rid of toxins, it can lower levels of certain drugs in the body, reducing their effectiveness. The best advice here is: do not use St John’s wort alongside any pharmaceutical medication without first seeking the advice of your herbal practitioner or doctor.

Taking St John’s wort improves your absorption of nutrients, and helps normalise stomach acid levels whether too high or too low. It is a well-known treatment for ulcers, heartburn and bloating.

It is also one of the best herbs for treating shingles, being antiviral as well as pain-relieving and also speeding up tissue repair. Use the infused oil externally over the painful area, and take the tincture internally at the same time.

As a proven antiviral, St John’s wort may have future benefits for HIV and AIDS treatment, but more research is needed.

Herbs of St John

St John's wort is one of the main herbs of St John the Baptist, whose birthday was taken to be 24 June. It is no coincidence that John, the precursor of Christ, was given a birth-date in midsummer and Christ himself in midwinter. This was one way the year's solstices were appropriated from older pagan festivals by the Christian Church.

St John's wort, which blooms so brightly around midsummer, whether taken as solstice or saint's day, is the name-plant for this time. Other herbs of St John were great plantain, mugwort, yarrow and vervain (all in this book), and corn marigold, dwarf elder, ivy and orpine (*Sedum telephium*).

The herbs of St John were gathered on the morning of 23 June, before sunrise. That evening fires were lit, the smoke purifying both herbs and the people (and cattle) who crossed the fires. The plants were now sanctified by the saint's power, and went into amulets, were placed above doorways and in cattle stalls, and stored for later use.

The overall protection afforded is well summarised in the French phrase *avoir toutes les herbes de la St-Jean*, meaning ready and safeguarded for everything.

The oil also works well as a rub for backache, sore muscles and gums, and being antiseptic will help heal wounds arising from injuries or surgery, as in older formulations.

From its former reputation as a 'cure-all' is derived the name of the garden St John's wort, tutsan, a corruption of the French name *La toute-sainte*.

Harvesting St John's wort

St John's wort really needs to be picked on a sunny day, when the sun is high in the sky. Pick the **flowering tops** of the plant, ie the flowers, buds and leaves. The stems are quite wiry, so use a pair of scissors.

St John's wort tincture

Put the **flowering tops** in a clear glass jar large enough to hold what you've picked, then pour on **vodka** until the herb is submerged. Put the lid on the jar, and shake to remove any air bubbles. Top up with a little more vodka if necessary.

Put the jar in a cupboard or other place away from the light for about a month, shaking occasionally. Your tincture is ready when the flowers have faded and the liquid is a reddish colour. Strain, bottle and label.

Dose: 1 to 4ml three times daily.

St John's wort tincture
- seaonal affective disorder (SAD)
- mild depression
- liver congestion
- shingles
- nervous exhaustion
- menopausal moods
- viral infections
- jet lag

St John's wort infused oil

Put the **flowering tops** you have picked into a clear glass jar, then pour on **extra virgin olive oil** until the herb is completely covered. Put the lid on and shake the jar to remove any air bubbles, then place on a sunny window sill for a month.

Check every now and then to make the sure the herb is still submerged in the oil, and if necessary stir it back under. The oil should turn red.

Strain off the oil, bottle and label.

Use externally as needed for backache, sore muscles, sciatica, neuralgia, arthritic joints and to help heal wounds.

St John's wort infused oil
- backache
- sore muscles
- neuropathy
- neuralgia
- shingles

• arthritis
• surgical scars
• bruises
• sprains

St John’s wort pillow

Dry St John’s wort flowering tops outside in the shade. Strip the leaves and flowers off the stalks and discard the stalks. Make a small cloth bag, leaving one end unstitched. Fill the bag loosely with the dried flowers and leaves, then stitch or tie the open end shut. Place the bag underneath your pillow.

St John’s wort pillow
• nightmares
• bad dreams
• fear of the dark

St John’s wort flower essence

Find a patch of St John’s wort growing in a peaceful spot. On a clear sunny day sit near the plants for a while until you feel relaxed and at peace. Because flower essences are based on the vibrational energy of a plant rather than its chemistry, your intention is important.

Place a small clear glass bowl on the ground near the plants. Fill it with about a cupful of **rain water or spring water**, then use a pair of scissors to pick enough **flowers** to cover the surface of the water. Leave them there for an hour or two. The water will still look clear, but the flowers may have wilted. Use your scissors to lift them carefully out of the water, then pour the water into a bottle that is half full of **brandy**. This is your mother essence. You can use any size of bottle you like, but a 200ml blue glass bottle works well, and it may be easier to fill if you use a funnel. If there is any water left over, drink it.

To use your essence, put three drops of mother essence in a 30ml dropper bottle filled with brandy. Using this stock bottle, you can:
• put 20 drops in the bath, then soak for at least twenty minutes.
• rub directly on the skin, or mix into creams.
• put a few drops in a glass or bottle of water and sip during the day.
• make a dosage bottle by putting three drops of stock essence into a dropper bottle containing a 50/50 brandy and water mix. Use several drops directly under the tongue as needed, or at least twice daily.

St John’s wort flower essence
• allergies
• environmental stress
• nightmares
• bedwetting
• seasonal affective disorder (SAD)
• protection

Sweet cicely

Myrrhis odorata

Sweet cicely is a common roadside plant in the dales of northern England. The whole plant has a sweet aniseed flavour, giving it many culinary uses. It is traditionally cooked with acid fruit, reducing the amount of sugar needed, and can be used as a sugar substitute by diabetics.

Sweet cicely is a herbal tonic that restores energy, lifts the spirits and settles the digestion.

Apiaceae (Umbelliferae) Carrot family

Description: An aromatic perennial with foamy umbels of creamy white flowers, up to 1m tall.

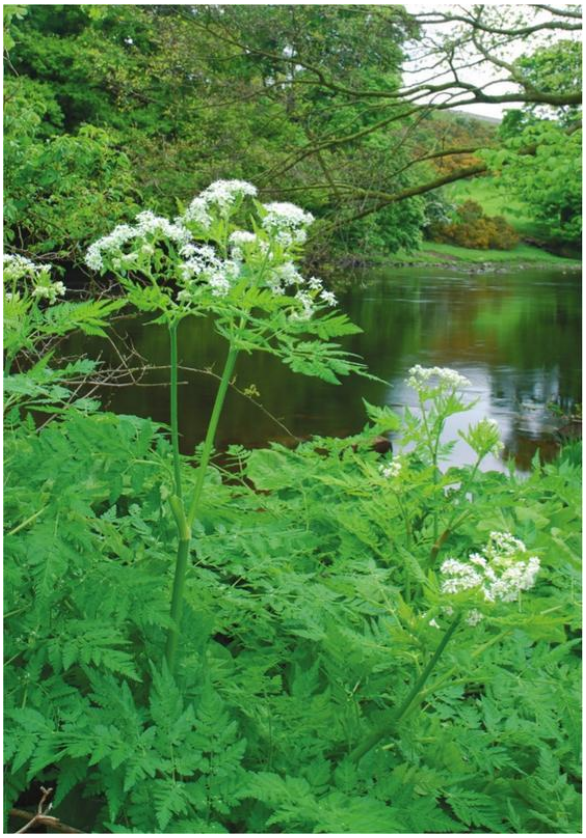
Habitat: Stream banks, road verges and grassy places.

Distribution: Found primarily in the north and west of Britain and less commonly in north-east Ireland.

Related species: Sweet cicely belongs to a huge family, which includes the common cow parsley but also poisonous species such as hemlock. Sweet cicely is readily

identifiable when in flower, and by its aniseed scent when crushed. The leaves usually have distinctive pale blotches.

Parts used: Leaves, flowers, unripe seeds.



Like many herbs, sweet cicely was more widely used in the past than it is now. It was once valued as a protection against infection in the time of plague, and greatly appreciated in salads. Gerard, writing in 1597, said: ‘The seeds eaten as a sallad whiles they are yet green, with oile, vinegar, and pepper, exceed all other sallads by many degrees, both in pleasantnesse of taste, sweetnesse of smell, and wholsomnesse for the cold and feeble stomacke.’ He also liked the leaves in salads, and said that the boiled roots are not only tasty but very good for old people.

Use sweet cicely for…

Sweet cicely still tastes just as good as it did all those years ago. It stimulates the appetite, relieves flatulence, griping and indigestion, and

lifts the spirits. The whole plant is edible, and as Culpeper said: ‘It is so harmless, you cannot use it amiss.’

Try the fresh young leaves, at their best before the plant flowers, chopped in salads. They can be used as a flavouring in cooking both sweet and savoury dishes. Add the flowers to salads and desserts, or use as a garnish. The green unripe seeds can be nibbled to stimulate the appetite or to settle indigestion or gas and griping. They have a stronger flavour than the leaves or flowers. The young stems can be eaten too.

Medicinally it has many virtues and few vices – so few that from the Greeks onwards it was seen as a plant that could not be overused. – Furnell (1985)

Sweet cicely is particularly good for older people who have lost their enthusiasm for life, as it lifts the spirits and enkindles the digestive fire. It enables them to enjoy their food with good appetite, warming the digestion and improving absorption of nutrients.

This plant is also beneficial for anyone who is weak or exhausted, perhaps after a chronic illness or through caring for someone else. It will help them get back their energy and *joie de vivre*, slowly rebuilding their strength and gently warming the whole system.

Sweet cicely apéritif

This can be drunk before meals to stimulate the appetite, or used as an after-dinner drink to settle the digestion. It can also be taken purely medicinally for flatulence, colic or griping pains.

Use either a handful of green **sweet cicely seeds** or several handfuls of **leaves and stems**. Chop them up and put into a large, clean glass jar.

Add about 500ml of **vodka**, and let steep in a dark place for two or three days. Taste it to check that the flavour of the herb has been absorbed by the alcohol, then strain and bottle in a clean glass bottle. The flavour improves if the bottle is left to age for two months in a dark place at room temperature before using.

Sweet cicely apéritif

- poor appetite
- weak digestion
- flatulence
- indigestion

(*This and previous two pages*) Sweet cicely in the North Yorkshire dales, May

Teasel

Dipsacus fullonum syn. *D. sylvestris*

Teasel is a stunning plant, tall and stately but also very beautiful if observed in detail when flowering. Its medicinal uses have long been appreciated in China, but are only recently being rediscovered by western herbalists.

Teasel helps with joint and tendon injuries, muscle pain and inflammation, chronic arthritis and lower back weakness. It is now being used for Lyme disease, ME and fibromyalgia.

Dipsacaceae Teasel family

Description: A tall biennial, up to 3m, with prickly rigid stems; small pale purple flowers in large conical flowerheads, opening from the middle; large and prickly basal leaves.

Habitat: Grassland, hedgerows, waste land and by motorways.

Distribution: Common in England and southern Wales, less frequent in Scotland and Ireland. Introduced to North America.

Related species: Fuller's teasel (*D. sativus*) is grown for commercial use in the west country; Japanese teasel (*D. japonicus*) is used in Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Parts used: Root, flowers used as an essence.

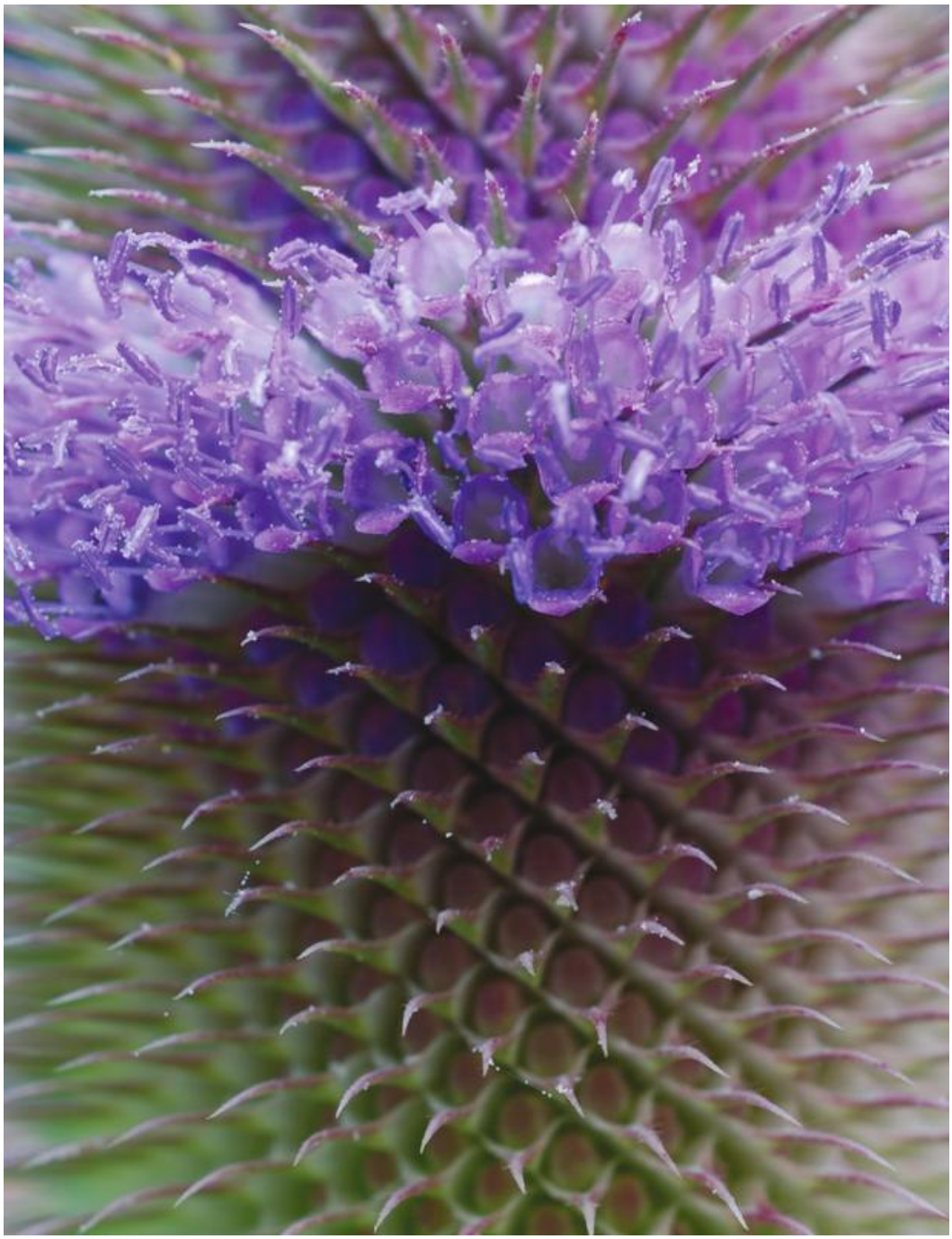
Teasel folklore has long referred to the way it collects rainwater in the cups where the leaves surround the stem, known from ancient times as the bath of Venus. This teasel water was said to be good for warts but particularly beneficial as an eyewash and as a wash for beautiful skin. We update this healing potential of teasel water with a home-made flower essence.

Teasel's famed commercial application is the use made of the dead flowerheads of the closely related fuller's teasel (*D. sativus*) in 'teasing up' the nap on wool. is the Anglo-Saxon term for fulling or cleaning cloth. Common names for teasel like card weed, barber's brush, brushes and gypsy's comb reflect this formerly important economic activity.

Fuller's teasel, with its hooked spines, was found to be uniquely effective both in manual and later in machine applications to raise the nap on fresh-made wool without breaking the cloth.

Use teasel for…

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, teasel root ‘tonifies the liver and kidneys’ and works on painful lower backs and knees, weak legs, cartilage and joints. It is also held to promote circulation and reduce inflammation. American herbalists William LeSassier and Matthew Wood have built on these uses and found in practice that the teasel (introduced from Europe) is, in Wood’s words, ‘invaluable’ for joint injury and chronic inflammation of the muscles. It is indicated for fibromyalgia, chronic arthritis, and Lyme disease.



The acute infection of Lyme disease, as explained in an excellent monograph by herbalist Stephen Harrod Buhner (which any Lyme sufferer should buy), involves these same issues of joint pain, blood circulation and tonifying of cartilage. Buhner finds results of using teasel root tincture for Lyme in the US are promising, though inconsistent in different regions.

Teasel flower essence has been found not only to bring relief in Lyme disease but also fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue and lupus. Treatment for these complex conditions should be in consultation with a herbalist and your doctor.

Because teasel root has to be dug in the first year when the plant is harder to identify, and as using the root kills the plant, we prefer a recipe for a flower essence.

Lyme disease

Lyme disease, or Lyme borreliosis, is on the increase in the British Isles and Europe.

The condition was first named in 1975 after a town in the US state of Connecticut, where there was an outbreak of 'juvenile arthritis'. In 1982 the source was found to be a spirochaete carried by ticks on deer.

Borrelia, the spirochete that causes the disease, is an unusually complex bacterium whose closest relative is the spirochaete that causes syphilis.

The ticks that are the main carriers of *Borrelia* are very small, and you may not even be aware you have been bitten. The classic bull's-eye rash, which spreads outwards from

the bite, is diagnostic of *Borrelia* infection, but only occurs in about a third of cases.

Lyme disease is a complex illness, so if you suspect you have it, seek expert professional help as soon as possible.

Teasel essence

Make this essence on a sunny day, using the **rainwater** collected for you by the teasel plant. Bend the plant over to pour some of the water from the leaf cups into a jug, then choose a flowerhead and bend it over into the jug so that it is immersed in the water for a minute or two. Alternatively, you can hold the flowerhead over a bowl and pour the rainwater from the jug over the blossoms into the bowl. If there is any debris in the water, filter it through a piece of muslin or a tea strainer as you pour it into a clean container to take home with you.

Measure the water and add an equal amount of **brandy** to preserve it. Bottle in a clean blue glass bottle, and label it.

To use, put three drops of this essence in a 30ml dropper bottle filled with brandy. Add 20 drops to bathwater, or use as directed below.

Dose: Put three drops in a glass or bottle of water and drink during the day. Or put three drops into a small dropper bottle filled with half brandy and half water, and take by dropping a few drops directly under your tongue several times a day.

Teasel essence

- exhaustion
- chronic fatigue (ME)
- joint pain
- muscle aches

Vervain

Verbena officinalis

A herb with a reputation for magic as well as medicine, vervain has a long history of use in Europe and Asia. It had so many reputed benefits that it gained a name as a cure-all; it was sacred for the Druids and used as an altar plant in ancient Rome.

It restores and calms the nervous system, is a digestive tonic and alleviates headaches. It can be used for premenstrual tension, menopausal hot flushes, fevers, gallstones, jaundice, asthma, insomnia, anxiety, stress and tension. Vervain is a go-to restorative during convalescence from chronic or long-term illness.

Verbenaceae Verbena family

Description: A slender perennial, to 60cm, with square stalks and spikes of small white or pale lilac flowers in late summer.

Habitat: Road verges and grassy places, especially on lime.

Distribution: Found in the southern British Isles, across Europe and Asia to Japan.

Related species: There are no other wild members of the verbena family found in the British Isles. The North American blue vervain (*V. hastata*) is used similarly. Lemon verbena (*Aloysia triphylla*) is often called vervain.

Parts used: Above-ground parts when in flower.

A prayer for picking vervain
All hail, thou holy herb, vervin,
Growing on the ground;
On the Mount of Calvary
There wast thou found;
Thou helpest many a grief,
And staunchest many a wound.
In the name of sweet Jesu,
I lift thee from the ground.

Vervain is such a delicate plant that it is easy to overlook, but its medicinal power is belied by its humble appearance. Tincturing it is always surprising, as a few skinny stalks of pale lilac or white flowers yield a strong, dark, almost black, brew.

Vervain has a rich past, both magical and medicinal, sacred and secular. It was an important herb to the Druids and Romans. Picking was always accompanied, until recent times, by a prayer.

Once used to treat madness and epilepsy, vervain is a powerful nerve restorative, and is particularly good for nervous exhaustion following periods of prolonged physical activity or stress. It is excellent in convalescence for the weakness that follows viral infections. Julie has used it to treat ME/chronic fatigue syndrome.

Vervain is a good herb to have on hand for the stress and hurried pace of modern lifestyles. It is particularly suited to people who are strong-

willed, enthusiastic, work too hard and cannot relax. It is one of Edward Bach's 38 original flower remedies, a specific for this type of intensity.

The physicians of Myddfai, in Wales in the thirteenth century, recommended vervain for scrofula, a tubercular infection of the lymph glands in the neck. Later, the great English herbalists had an uneasy relationship with the plant, Gerard decrying it and Culpeper favouring it. Parkinson (1640) chose the positive side by recommending vervain for 'generally all the inward paines and torments of the body'.

Use vervain for…

Because vervain works on the nervous system, liver, kidneys and digestion and also balances hormones, in addition to being a wound herb, it is still valid in an unusual array of conditions, and deserves to be more widely used.

A vulnerary treatment in classical Rome, the crushed or chewed fresh leaf can still be applied to cuts and scrapes to soothe and promote healing. It is effective where there is heat and irritation, so works well on bramble scratches, boils and burns.

Vervain had a role in both love and war in Rome. It was aphrodisiac, being dedicated to Venus: a Roman bride would wear a sprig at her wedding. A *verbenarius* was a herald-at-arms who wore a chaplet of vervain as a flag of truce.

Coming to recent times, research in the United States confirms that vervain, along with self-heal, is a top herb for normalising levels of thyroid hormones, being effective in both the underactive and overactive conditions. Vervain appears to affect the amount of TSH (thyroid-stimulating hormone) released by the pituitary gland.

So many Virtues are attributed by Authors, to this Plant, that it would tire one to reckon them up.
– Pechey (1707)

Spenser called it ‘veinhealing verven’. It had the old name of ‘simpler’s joy’.
– Pratt (1857)

Drinking vervain tea very hot will make you sweat, which means it is a really effective treatment at the start of a cold or fever, when you are actively eliminating toxins. But it also relaxes and soothes, settling an upset digestion as well as a preoccupied, racing mind.

As a tincture, vervain is cooling for menopausal hot flushes. It is particularly valuable to have available where restlessness and nervous tension are part of the menopausal picture.

Vervain tea is good for childhood illnesses, where the child is restless and irritable. Instead of fidgeting, he or she will be helped to relax and recuperate. If there is a fever, vervain will encourage sweating and prevent the temperature from going too high. It combines well with lime blossom or elderflower for fevers.

Although there has been too little modern research on vervain, experience and the clinical practice of the herbalists who use it largely support its old reputation as a ‘heal-all’. It is a safe remedy, gentle enough for children and convalescents, and tonic for older people.

Unfortunately, vervain seems to be becoming less common as a wild plant in Britain. If you can’t find any near you, it is worth growing some in your own garden for medicinal use.

Harvesting vervain

Pick vervain when in flower, ideally towards the end of flowering. For use as a tea, dry the above-ground parts whole in an airing cupboard or in the open air on a piece of paper. When the plant is crisp, discard the larger stems and cut up or crumble into small pieces.

Vervain tea

Use a heaped teasoonful of the **dried herb** per mug of **boiling water**, and allow to steep for 5 minutes. Strain and drink hot.

Dose: 1 mug three times a day. For insomnia from restlessness, drink a cupful or two in the evening. For sprains and deep bruises, 2 or 3 cups a day for at least three or four days.
Combinations: Mixes well with lime blossom for flavour and therapeutic value; also effective with self-heal.

Vervain tea
- nervous tension
- anxiety
- colds and fevers
- premenstrual tension
- menstrual headaches
- poor absorption
- digestive problems
- inability to relax
- living on nerves
- hyperactivity
- thyroid imbalance
- muscular tension

Vervain tincture

Chop up fresh **vervain** and put in a blender with enough **vodka** to cover. Blend briefly, then pour the mixture into jars and keep in a cool dark place for a week. Strain and bottle.

Dose: 20 drops in a little water three times daily.

Vervain tincture
- stress and tension
- anxiety
- premenstrual tension
- menstrual headaches
- nervous tension
- menopause
- hot flushes
- poor absorption
- digestive problems
- inability to relax
- living on nerves

- hyperactivity
- thyroid imbalance

White deadnettle, Archangel

Lamium album

White deadnettle is a uterine tonic with an ability to stop loss of fluids from the body, whether excessive menstrual flow, abnormal vaginal discharge, diarrhoea or a runny nose.

The leaves and flowers can be eaten, raw or cooked. The flowers are full of nectar, enjoyed by insects and children alike, and the leaves can be used as a poultice for cuts and splinters.

Lamiaceae (Labiatae) Deadnettle family

Description: Perennial with leaves similar to stinging nettle, but paler green and without the sting. Grows to 60cm and has whorls of creamy white flowers.

Habitat: Hedgebanks, roadsides, gardens and waste ground.

Distribution: Widespread in the British Isles, less common in Wales, Ireland and Scotland; found across north and central Europe to Asia; naturalised in North America, Australasia.

Related species: There are several other common species in the genus, but none that can be confused with white deadnettle. The other species were used medicinally in the past.

Parts used: Flowering tops whenever flowering, which can be almost any time of year.

The white deadnettle is so named because it resembles a stinging nettle, but has no stinging hairs. Other old names, such as deaf, dumb or blind nettle, also refer to the plant's benign nature. The white deadnettle is also known as bee nettle, with stores of honey at the base of its corolla attracting the humble bees that fertilise it. The same sweet taste has also made sucking the white flowers irresistible to generations of children.

It can be confusing in spring when both the stinging and non-stinging plants, which often grow together, are in leaf and there are no flowers to distinguish them. The secret lies in the stem, which is square and hollow in white deadnettle, round and solid in stinging nettle.

The white deadnettle is perhaps too common for its own good, and has been unduly neglected both as an attractive plant with some border potential – and making an excellent mulch – and for its many medicinal qualities.

The plant’s older name of archangel refers to Archangel Michael, whose day at one time correlated roughly with the first deadnettle flowers. We like the name for its protective connotations: it supports the female reproductive system and prevents the body from losing precious fluids through discharges of all sorts.

White deadnettle blooming at the Rollright Stones, Oxfordshire, April

Use white deadnettle for…

The main use herbalists make of the plant is as a uterine tonic. Julie finds it effective in treating painful periods and bleeding between periods, in reducing excessively heavy menstrual flow and for cystitis. It can be used

for treating leucorrhoea or vaginal discharge (once called ‘whites’), in which case the tea treatment (three cups a day) is continued for at least three weeks. A douche, made from a strong deadnettle tea, is good for vaginal discharges.

The tea also forms part of a treatment regime for benign prostate hyperplasia (BPH), and to speed recovery after prostate surgery.

The tea’s mild astringency is supportive in treating respiratory complaints, especially where there is phlegm and catarrh.

White deadnettle also helps to regulate the bowel, and works well for gastrointestinal disorders, constipation, flatulence and, in particular, diarrhoea. It eases cramps and increases urination.

Externally, it has its uses in treatment as a poultice for cuts, bites, bruises, burns, splinters, varicose veins and arthritic pain. For first aid, if you are out walking, the simplest method in the field is to chew deadnettle leaves and apply them to the sore point.

Harvesting white deadnettle

White deadnettle can be found blooming almost any time of year, even right through the winter in mild areas. It is most prolific in the spring, but can be harvested whenever found in flower. Break off the stem a few leaves below the flower spikes.

If you want to store it, dry the sprigs whole, either by spreading them on a drying rack or paper, or by hanging small bunches tied with string or thread from the rafters or a laundry airer. When they turn crisp and dry, crumble the leaves and flowers, and discard stems.

White deadnettle tea

Use a sprig of fresh flowering **white deadnettle**, or 1 to 2 teaspoons of the dried herb, per cup or mug of **boiling water**. Allow to infuse for about 10 minutes, then strain and drink.

Dose: 1 cup or mugful 3 times a day.

White deadnettle tea
- heavy menstruation
- painful periods
- vaginal discharge
- IBS
- cystitis
- diarrhoea
- respiratory catarrh

White deadnettle douche

Make a strong tea with a handful of **fresh or dried herb** to 500ml of **boiling water**, and let it infuse until cool. Strain, and inject the liquid into the vagina using a douche bag. Repeat once a day until the discharge stops. If it continues for a week or more, consult your GP or herbal practitioner.

White deadnettle douche
- vaginal discharge

Fresh white deadnettle leaf poultice

Pick the **fresh leaves** and either chew them or mash them with a mortar and pestle, then apply to the affected area and hold in place with a bandage or plaster. Change for a fresh poultice once or twice a day until healed, or, in the case of a splinter, until it is drawn out.

Fresh leaf poultice
- burns
- bruises

• splinters
• cuts

[the distilled water of deadnettle] *is used to make the heart merry, to make a good colour in the face, and to refresh the vitall spirits.*
– Gerard (1597)

It is without question a gentle but really useful remedy for troubles of the reproductive organs in women, especially leucorrhoea.
– Barker (2001)

Wild lettuce

Lactuca virosa, L. serriola

If you grew up with Beatrix Potter, you know from *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies* that eating flowering lettuces makes you sleepy. Our garden lettuces have been bred to reduce their bitterness, and hence herbal value, and as a result have less of a soporific effect than wild lettuce.

Asteraceae (Compositae) Daisy family

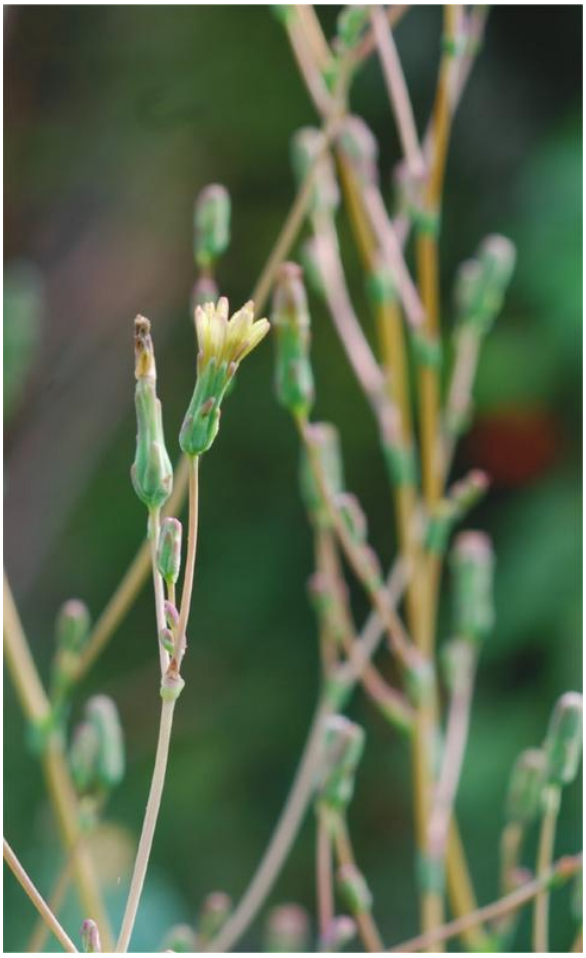
Description: Prickly lettuce (*Lactuca serriola*) is a tall biennial with broad grey–green leaves and arrays of small, pale yellow flowers. Great or greater prickly lettuce or lettuce opium (*L. virosa*) is darker green, with purple, less spiny stems and similar small yellow flowers. Both species have distinctive spines along the underside of the midrib of the leaves.

Habitat: Roadsides, hedgerows, disturbed or waste ground.

Distribution: Prickly lettuce is becoming widespread in central and southern England; great lettuce is less common in the same general area.

Related species: Garden lettuce (*L. sativa*) can be used similarly, but is not as strong. *L. canadensis* is the North American wild lettuce.

Parts used: Leaves and latex, gathered when plant is in flower, in late summer.



The lettuce we buy in the shop or grow in our garden is a distant and hybridised relative of wild lettuce, but much altered in appearance and flavour. The only thing they have left in common is a milky sap or latex (*lactuca*) found in the stems of some commercial varieties and all through the plant in wilder varieties.

Strangely, though, if you allow a lettuce in your garden to ‘bolt’ (ie flower and then seed), it reverts to something like the wild form, and recovers some of the healthy bitterness we try so hard to breed out of domesticated versions.

It is this bitter latex that is valued medicinally, and all lettuces have some of it. It is most abundant in great lettuce, less so in prickly lettuce and less again in garden forms. It can be harvested by cutting the flowering

tops or leaves in summer and scraping off the juice. White when fresh, this juice oxidises to brown in the air.

In this form it is known as lactucarium, and is chemically akin to opium, though unrelated botanically. Introduced to medical practice in 1771, it was later named lettuce opium. It was much used to adulterate opium in cough mixtures and as a sedative.

Lactucarium could be bought in British pharmacies until the 1930s and was still ‘official’. Nowadays the only ‘official’ part of wild lettuce is the dried leaves. It is just as well, lactucarium being unreliable in content and action.

Taking lettuce for insomnia is old medicine. Galen, first-century AD physician to Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, wrote: ‘I have found no better remedy for my trouble than eating lettuce of an evening.’

But in one respect the reputation of lettuce has changed dramatically since ancient times. A form of cos lettuce, with its wild growth and white sap, was once held sacred to Min, the Egyptian god of fertility. But by the time of the ancient Greeks lettuce had become ‘the eunuch’s plant’.

Nowadays lettuce is a recognised anaphrodisiac, with a role in reducing sexual desire; externally, a cold lettuce tea is soothing and cooling for inflamed sexual organs. This effect works equally on both sexes (unlike hops). An old saying from Surrey went: ‘O’er much lettuce in the garden will stop a young wife’s bearing’.

Wild lettuce’s sedative, cooling value extends to soothing the respiratory system, for dry, irritating coughs and whooping cough. Relaxing spasm in the stomach and uterus, it relieves gripes and period pain. It is also beneficial for muscular and rheumatic pains.

Prickly lettuce; flowers shown previous page.

Wild lettuce tincture

Harvest leaves and above-ground parts of wild lettuce while it is in flower in the summer. Chop it up and place in a blender with enough **vodka** to cover. Blend, then put the mixture into a jar and leave it in a cool dark place for two weeks. Strain and bottle.

Dose: Half a teaspoonful 3 times a day to calm over-excitement, or 1 teaspoonful at bedtime to help with sleep.

Wild lettuce tincture

- insomnia
- overactivity

- excitability
- colicky pains
- irritable coughs

Wild rose

Wild rose

Rosa spp.

For centuries the wild or dog rose was valued most for its galls, used to eliminate the stone. It was only in the 1930s that the value of the hips was proven, just in time for their use in a vitamin-rich syrup given to Britain's wartime children against infection.

Rose is the plant of love, the petals being the basis of the perfume industry. Herbally, it supports the immune system, is a good eliminator and is cooling to the body.

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: Rambling deciduous shrubs with thorny stems and pink or white flowers, followed by bright scarlet hips in the autumn.

Habitat: Hedgerows, scrub and woods.

Distribution: Widespread.

Species used: There are several species, and they can all be used medicinally. Dog rose (*R. canina*) is the most common, with fragrant pale pink or white flowers and scarlet hips. Sweetbriar (Eglantine) roses (*R. rubiginosa*) have pretty apple-scented leaves and stems.

Parts used: Flowers gathered in midsummer and hips harvested in autumn.

Autumn brings mist and mellow fruitfulness, in Keats's famous words, but he overlooks the frosts and 'flus of the new season. Fortunately, our hedgerows are 'loaded and blessed' with a bounty of **rose hips** to help us build up strength and resistance for the winter.

Everybody now knows that rose hips contain plentiful vitamins and minerals, but it was only in the 1930s that research established that home-grown hips had twenty, even forty times more vitamin C than imported oranges, plus good supplies of vitamins A, B and K.

Oranges were to be an early casualty of the Second World War in Britain, and the Ministry of Food turned to the nation's school children to collect the domestic alternative. By 1945 amounts of 450 tons or so of rose hips were gathered each autumn to make into syrup; collectors were paid 3d a pound, a useful bit of pin money for youthful entrepreneurs.

Rose hip syrup was rationed and provided to mothers for their children through the war years and for some time thereafter. The syrup (made by Delrosa) was in the shops, although Matthew, a post-war baby, remembers better the joy of seeing and eating his first orange in the early 1950s.

Use wild rose for…

Rose hips and petals (the leaves are not used much) offer support to the body's immune system and help fight infection in the digestive tract; they are also diuretic, ie assist in elimination of wastes through the urinary system, as well as cooling to the body, bringing down fevers and reducing heat on the skin in the form of rashes and inflammations.

This threefold action – supporting immunity, helping elimination, and being cooling – makes rose a superb natural reliever of cold and 'flu symptoms, sore throats, runny noses and blocked chests.

The rose distills a healing balm, The beating pulse of pain to calm.
– Anacreon (Greek writer, born c570 BC)

Rose shreede smalle and sod in hony makyth that hony medycynable wyth gode smalle: And this comfortyeth and clenseth and defyeth gleymy humours.
– a recipe for rose honey by Bartholomew the Englishman (1250)

The Red Rose is astringent, and bitter. It comforts the Heart, and strengthens the Stomach.
– Pechey (1707)

The effect is not only good for children, and rose hip tea as well as syrup are often given to convalescents and older people to improve their general resistance, as well as lighten their mood.

But there is one note of caution in this roll-call of autumnal virtue. The official wartime instructions emphasised that while the flesh of dog rose hips was so good for you the seeds, with their short hairs, were possibly dangerous if taken internally. However, the same hairs have provided ‘itching powder’ fun for generations of boys.

Straining stewed hips to remove the irritant hairs was specified in the wartime recipe, and is still noted in instructions for the syrup.

Rose petals were favoured by herbalists of old mainly for cooling and astringent qualities, and to strengthen the heart and spirits. Today's herbalists use them in hormone-balancing formulae and for support in life-cycle stages. Rose hips, petals and essential oil all buttress the nervous system, relieving insomnia, soothing the nerves and lifting depression, as well as evening out heart palpitations and arrhythmias.

The astringent effect, particularly of the petals, is a result of high tannin levels, which help make rose useful in staunching bleeding and unwanted discharges. There is an effect too on the digestive system, cutting over-acidity and over-activity in the stomach, as well as reducing the spasms involved in diarrhoea, colitis and dysentery.

The petals have good antiviral properties and combine well with St John's wort, elder and self-heal for treating viral infections. There are recent claims for anti-HIV qualities in *R. damascena*, the damask rose.

Additionally, the petals, whether in the form of a water infusion, a distilled rose water or, as in our recipe, a glycerite, make a fragrant skin toner and cleanser, which will take the heat out of boils, acne, spots and rashes. Rose water is also a soft, safe eyewash, mouthwash and gargle, and a douche.

A story is told in *The Odyssey* of how good rose is for the skin, as well as winning the heart. Milto, a young girl and the daughter of a humble artisan, would put a fresh garland of roses each morning in the temple of Venus, the goddess of love. Milto was beautiful, but at one time a boil began to grow on her chin, and she became distraught.

In a dream the goddess came to Milto and told her to apply some of the roses to her face. She did so, and recovered her beauty and equanimity to such an extent that she later became the favourite wife of the Persian emperor Cyrus.

Rose petals make a wonderful cooling tonic for the whole female reproductive system, reducing uterine pain and the cramp of heavy periods, and supplementing other treatment of infertility and low libido. Rose's cooling and balancing qualities are particularly helpful during the menopause.

This is the ultimate feminine flower, found in practically every perfume, soap and aphrodisiac, yet men often need it too, and rose can be used to treat impotence.

Rose has a softening action on the heart on an emotional level, and it is no accident that a dozen red roses are a conventional expression of the lover's feelings. Rose is prescribed by herbalists if the emotional aspect of 'heart' is affected or there is a need for love. Rose helps us to love ourselves and be open to the love of others.

So, given all this, does the wild rose of Britain deserve its name 'dog'? This might derive from derogatory comments on its commonness – Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), for example, thought Britain was named Albion because it was covered with white roses (*alba* meant white).

But rose's defenders prefer an origin from an Anglo-Saxon term meaning 'dagger', for the thorn, or possibly the branch out of which dagger handles could be made. Another version of the name is that rose root was once thought to cure rabies, hence dog rose.

Take three roses, white, pink and red. Wear them next to your heart for three days. Steep them in wine for three days more, then give to your lover. When he drinks, he will be yours forever.
– traditional love-charm, Germany

What may be less known today is that for centuries the main use of wild rose was for its gall or ‘briar balls’, known as Robin’s pincushions or bedeguars. Apothecaries ground them into a powder and sold them to treat kidney or bladder stone and as a diuretic. This use is long obsolete.

In any event, the success of the modern domesticated rose owes much to the wild form, and it is still usual for more tender species of ornamental roses to be grafted on to a wild rootstock. The petals of your garden roses can be used medicinally, if they are fragrant.

The Seals have a family story of rose grafting. Matthew's grandfather Ted Seal lived in Leicester and was a fervent gardener. For a private joke he grafted some big blowsy roses on to wild briars growing by the railway line to London.

He said he wanted to confuse the passengers and make them think the country roses near Leicester were something special. Perhaps he was one of those people who knew that thorns have roses.

Rose petal glycerite

You can use garden roses along with wild roses for this recipe, as long as they haven't been sprayed.

Pick fragrant **rose petals** and put them in a jar with a mixture of 60% **vegetable glycerine** and 40% **water**. Put the jar on a sunny window ledge or in a warm place. Stir occasionally to keep the petals beneath the surface of the liquid. You can add more petals over the season, removing any that have turned transparent. When the last petals have lost their colour, strain off the liquid and bottle. It should have a powerful aroma of rose, and taste heavenly.

Uses: 1 teaspoonful as needed for sore throats or viral infections.
For a 'broken heart' or grief, mix half and half with hawthorn tincture and take 1 teaspoonful several times a day. Rose glycerite is a pleasant addition to many herbal tinctures and formulae.
As a face lotion for dry or delicate skin, mix half and half with water and apply daily.

Rose petal glycerite
- viral infections
- hormone balance
- menopause
- dry skin
- feeling unloved
- feeling unloving
- grief
- loneliness

Rose hip vinegar

Put 20 or 30 **rose hips** in a jar or flask and cover with **apple cider vinegar**. If you want to speed up the process, slit the skins of the hips with a sharp knife before putting them in the vinegar. Leave on a sunny window sill for about a month, then strain and bottle.

Uses: For sore throats, mix a tablespoonful with a little warm water, gargle and then swallow. For colds, make a drink using a tablespoon of rose hip vinegar in a mug of hot water, sweetened to taste with honey; or use in salad dressings.

Rose hip vinegar
- colds
- sore throats

• salad dressings

Raw rose hip syrup

Gently score a few lines through the skin of red **rose hips**, then layer them in a wide-mouthed jar with enough **sugar** to fill up all the gaps between the hips. Leave on a sunny window sill for a couple of months or until the sugar has drawn the juice from the hips and liquified. Strain off the liquid, bottle and store in the fridge. This is a really thick and delicious syrup. Take a teaspoonful or two daily to prevent colds.

Boiled rose hip syrup

This is the more traditional way to make the syrup, and what it may lose in vitamin C content it gains in having a longer shelf life.

Measure the volume of the **rose hips** you have picked, then pour them into a saucepan with half their volume of **water** (500ml water to 1 litre hips). Boil hips and water for 20 minutes in a covered saucepan. Allow to cool, then strain through a jelly bag. For every 2 cups of juice, add 1 cup **sugar**. Boil for 10 minutes and pour while still hot into sterilised bottles. Label bottles when cool. Take a teaspoonful or two daily to prevent colds, or more frequently as needed for sore throats and colds.

Rose hip syrup
• colds
• sore throats
• source of vitamin C

In Wynter and in Somer it [Syrope of Rooses] maye be geuen competently to feble sicke melacoly and colorike people.
– Askham's Herbal (1550)

Willow

Salix alba, S. fragilis

Willow bark contains salicin and other aspirin-like compounds. It is used to treat pain and inflammation, but does not have the stomach-irritating or blood-thinning effects of aspirin.

Willow helps to lower fevers, and can be used as a gentle pain reliever for headaches, arthritis, gout, rheumatism, muscle aches and lower back pain.

Salicaceae Willow family

Description: Tall deciduous trees that frequently hybridise with each other.

Habitat: Riverbanks, fens and hedgerows.

Distribution: Widespread, found everywhere except the far north-west of Scotland and Ireland.

Species used: Crack willow (*S. fragilis*) has higher levels of salicin than white willow (*S. alba*), which is the species mentioned in most herbals. Many species are used medicinally worldwide, including the North American black willow (*S. nigra*).

Parts used: Bark, collected in spring, and leaves.

It is a fine cool tree, the boughs of which are very convenient to be placed in the chamber of one sick of a fever.
– Culpeper (1653)

The branch tips and leaves, known as willow tips… are traditionally used in many parts of South Africa to treat rheumatism and fever.
– Van Wyk *et al*. (1997)

Willows are graceful trees often found growing by water. White willow is particularly elegant, with its silvery leaves swaying in the wind. Crack willow is so named because the fast-growing trunk often cracks and splits under its own weight. The familiar silver catkins, ‘pussy willow’, are from the sallows, a group of willows with broader leaves.

Willows are highly adaptable trees, and will usually root readily from a stick put in the ground. Willow leaves, mashed up and soaked in water, can be used as a natural rooting hormone to help root cuttings of other plants.

Willows have many uses. The flexible shoots, mainly of osier (*Salix viminalis*), make excellent wicker baskets, and the wood of a variety of white willow is used commercially for clogs and cricket bats. Willow wood is burnt to make charcoal for drawing, and willow charcoal was once used in producing gunpowder.

Willow contains high levels of pain-relieving salicin. The modern use of aspirin is said to begin in 1763 when Rev. Edmund Stone extracted salicylic acid from willow bark for his parishioners' use. During the nineteenth century various scientists produced salicylic acid in the laboratory, and in 1853 the French chemist Charles Gerhardt made a primitive form of aspirin. Later a German chemist discovered a better method for synthesising the drug, and it started being marketed by Bayer in 1899. Aspirin, acetylsalicylic acid, is one of the most widely used drugs in the world today.

Interestingly, the early herbals do not focus on willow for relieving pain but more on its astringent action in stopping bleeding, diarrhoea and other 'fluxes'. The leaves, boiled in wine and drunk over an extended period of time, were considered an effective treatment to reduce lust in both sexes.

It is possible that willow was used for pain as a folk remedy that didn't make it into the books. Willow bark was chewed by country folk to relieve headaches and toothache, and in the Fens to treat the ague, a type of malarial fever.

Today herbalists use willow mainly for pain, inflammation and fever. Our son, who suffered from ME for several years as a young teenager, always asked for it for his headaches and muscle aches and pains. Like meadowsweet, it is effective for arthritis and rheumatism, and can help with the pain of polymyalgia rheumatica and fibromyalgia, for which it combines well with Guelder rose.

Pussy willow, Shropshire, in April.

Note that if you are taking aspirin as a blood thinner, you cannot replace it with willow, which lacks this effect. But for long-term pain relief willow may be better for the stomach than aspirin.

Caution: Do not take willow if you are allergic to aspirin or while breastfeeding.

Willow bark tincture

Harvest the bark in the spring, from branches where it isn't too thick. Use a sharp knife to strip thin slices of bark lengthwise off the branch on one side, taking care not to take too much from any one place.

Put the **willow bark** in a jar, and pour in enough **vodka** to cover it. Leave it in a cool dark place for a month, shaking regularly every few days. Strain off the liquid, bottle and label it.

Dose: 2–5ml three times a day, taken in a little water when needed for relief of pain and inflammation.

Willow bark tincture

- aches and pains
- headache
- arthritis
- rheumatism
- muscle aches
- backache
- gout
- period pain
- colds and 'flu

- sports injuries

Willowherb

Epilobium spp.

The small-flowered willowherbs are a specific remedy for prostate problems, including benign prostate hyperplasia (BHP). Plants in this informal group help shrink the tissues, arrest cell proliferation and normalise urinary function.

Small-flowered willowherbs are also effective for a wide range of bladder and urinary problems, for women as well as men, with the astringent and diuretic action serving to tone and detoxify the urinary tract.

Onagraceae Willowherb family

Description: Perennials, up to about 60cm, recognisable by small pink flowers, which have four notched petals, borne on the ends of long seed-pods. These split and curl when ripe to release downy seeds.

Habitat: Gardens and other disturbed ground, woods and damp places.

Distribution: Widespread in the British Isles.

Species: There are about ten species, which are used interchangeably, the most common being hoary willowherb (*E. parviflorum*), broad-leaved willowherb (*E. montanum*), short-fruited willowherb (*E. obscurum*), American willowherb (*E. ciliatum*), and marsh willowherb (*E. palustre*).

Related species: Rosebay willowherb has been reclassified into the genus *Chamerion*, but is closely related and has similar uses. The great willowherb (*E. hirsutum*) is not used in herbal medicine – it grows to 1.8m, has large cerise flowers and grows in ditches or by streams.

Parts used: Above-ground parts in flower.

The Austrian herbalist Maria Treben was the first to bring the small-flowered willowherbs to public attention in recent times. She wrote of helping hundreds of people with prostate problems by using this neglected herb.

Julie’s father, living in Namibia (which still has a strong German influence from colonial days), drank willowherb tea for his prostate twenty-five years ago, but the tea is still not widely available for sale in the UK. All the more reason to grow or pick your own!

These willowherbs frequently appear as garden weeds because they like bare or disturbed soil. If you break the stem about halfway up, the plant will grow new side shoots, and you can collect from the same plant several times during the summer.

Any of the small-flowered species can be used (see panel on the left), which is handy because they hybridise easily and are difficult to identify

individually. The flowers vary in colour from deep pink to almost white, and leaf shapes range from very narrow to quite broad, and from smooth to downy.

The name willowherb comes from the willow-like leaves. The flowers of some species look like burning matches, with the bright pink buds at the end of long ovaries or unripe seed pods (or cods as the old English herbalists call them).

These writers classified willowherbs with the loosestrifes. Gerard describes the seed ‘wrapped in a cottony or downy wooll, which is carried away with the winde when the seed is ripe’, but apparently didn’t use the plant. Parkinson calls it very astringent and ‘effectuall both to stanch blood, restrain fluxes, heale the sores of the mouth and secret parts, close up quickly greene wounds and heale old ulcers’.

While best known as a prostate remedy, these plants aren’t just for men. They can help women with bladder and urinary problems too, used on their own or with pellitory of the wall, couch grass, horsetail and bilberry leaves.

For prostate enlargement, willowherbs can be taken alongside nettle root, another effective remedy for the condition. But do consult your herbalist or doctor first.

It is well worth keeping a little patch of willowherbs in a corner of your garden. They are persistent, growing up in cracks of paving or unweeded bare soil, so once established you’ll have a ready supply on hand (we know gardeners will regard these words as heretical).

Everyone who knows this herb values and preserves it through careful picking.
– Treben (1983)

These two specimens from our garden show how variable in form small-flowered willowherbs can be in even a small area

Harvesting willowherb

Havest by picking the flowering stems about halfway up. This enables the plant to produce more flowers and seeds later on. Dry in a shady place. As the plants dry, the seed pods often break open and release tiny downy seeds, so you might want to do this outdoors. You can use the whole plant, but the tea is more manageable if you discard the fluffy seeds and larger stems, then cut into small pieces with a pair of scissors and store in jars or brown paper bags in a cool dry place.

Willowherb tea

Use a heaped teaspoonful of the **dried herb** per mug of **boiling water**, and infuse for about 3 minutes. Drink two to three cups a day. Maria Treben recommends 1 cup in the morning on an empty stomach and another half an hour before the evening meal.

Willowherb tea

- prostate enlargement
- urinary problems
- bladder disorders
- diarrhoea

Wood betony

Stachys officinalis syn. *Betonica officinalis*

Wood betony, often known simply as betony, was a significant remedy from ancient times. A Roman physician wrote a whole book extolling its virtues, and it was the herb of choice for exorcising demons and protection against all kinds of evil in the Middle Ages.

Wood betony is a nerve tonic, and through its action on the solar plexus has a wide range of benefits, especially on the digestion. It also improves circulation, and is excellent for the elderly.

Lamiaceae (Labiatae) Deadnettle family

Description: A perennial up to 50cm tall, with bluntly toothed leaves in a rosette, and bright magenta flowers.

Habitat: Hedgerows, heaths, grassy places and woodland clearings.

Distribution: Common in Wales and England except for East Anglia, very rare in Scotland and Ireland.

Related species: There are five other *Stachys* species in the British Isles, all known as woundworts, but not currently used much medicinally. The most common of these is hedge woundwort (*S. sylvatica*).

Identification: Wood betony can look like a purple orchid, but is easily distinguished from any other plant by its type of toothed leaves, which are unique.

Parts used: Leaves and flowers.

Wood betony is another herb that does so much that it is hard to know where to start in writing about it. It is a pretty, orchid-like but easily overlooked plant, and, appropriately, works quietly to improve health over a broad front.

As a herbal all-rounder it was well known to the ancients. Culpeper (1653) relates that Antonius Musa, physician to Emperor Augustus, wrote a monograph on betony, with 47 different conditions it would treat, among them protection from both snakes and evil.

Anne Pratt, a prolific mid-nineteenth-century botanist, writes that betony was still highly valued in Italy. She quotes two Italian proverbs: ‘May you have more virtues than betony’, as a farewell to a friend, and ‘Sell your coat, and buy betony’, for those in pain.

John Parkinson (1640) sums up the reputation of betony in his own day, neatly indicating the link he valued of ‘daily experience’ and the authority of the ancients:

it is found by daily experience, as Dioscorides formerly wrote thereof, to be good for innumerable diseases.

Betony was venerated by the Celts, and its common name is thought to be a corruption of two Celtic words: ‘bew’ for head, and ‘ton’ for improve, making clear its power to cure head problems.

Throughout the Middle Ages this was a herb cultivated in monastic gardens and graveyards, for protection against witchcraft. Amulets of betony would be worn around the neck or placed under the pillow for personal protection.

It could be that betony’s old reputation as a protector stems from its ability to help us face the fears and evils in our own minds. The *Grete Herball* (1526) made sure by combining a betony remedy with wine ‘for them that ben to ferfull’:

gyue two dragmes of powdre hereof wt warme water and as moche wyne at the tyme that the fere cometh.

Use wood betony for…

Perhaps this echo of magic and folklore has swayed many classically trained herbalists against betony, and some modern writers are dismissive of its efficacy. We see it as a herb, like St John’s wort or vervain, that meets ever-changing physical and spiritual needs.

Today it is best known as a nerve tonic, which strengthens the entire nervous system. Betony calms and relaxes, helping release stress and

tension from both mind and body.

It is an excellent herb for insomnia stemming from nervous tension, where endless thoughts keep churning and you just can't let go and relax. Have a cup of the tea or a few drops of the tincture in the evening for deep relaxation, followed by a restorative sleep.

Betony was once used to treat madness, and can still have a useful role in some psychiatric disorders. Herbalists favour it for people coming off addictive drugs or recovering from head injuries.

Betony is beneficial for several kinds of headache, including tension, migraine and liverish types. It helps when there is a feeling of spaciness and unconnectedness as well as in cases of frantic mental activity and scattered thoughts.

Because betony affects the solar plexus, it assists in a wide range of digestive problems, harmonising the action of the entire digestive tract. It is helpful both when anxiety, irritability or depression are affecting the digestion, or digestive upsets are upsetting the mind.

We have often seen in cottages in Kent… large bundles of the 'medicinal Betony', as Clare calls it, hung up for winter use.
– Pratt (1857)

Thy wild-woad on each road we see;
And medicinal betony, By thy woodside-railing, reeves
With antique mullein's flannel-leaves.
– Clare, 'Cowper Green' (1828)

Betony stimulates a weak digestive tract but also soothes and calms it. It is helpful when there is irritable bowel syndrome, gastritis, colitis and other conditions with inflammation and tension in the gut. It is the perfect remedy for ‘butterflies in the stomach’ and for reconnecting us to ‘gut instincts’. When we are ‘too much in our heads’, it can bring us down to earth, to a more grounded level of reaction and feeling.

… it is a very precious herb, that is certain, and most fitting to be kept in a man’s house, both in syrup, conserve, oil, ointment, and plaister.
– Culpeper (1653)

… the Leaves … are Aromatick, and of a pleasant taste, and agreeable to Nature in Food and Physick.
– Pechey (1707)

Betony also improves concentration and memory, which, combined with its calming qualities, makes it a good choice during examinations or other stressful times in our lives when we need to be able to focus and concentrate.

With effects on memory, circulation and digestion, betony is an ideal herb for older people or anyone recovering from longterm illness. It will gently warm and invigorate the whole system, increasing mental and physical strength. It improves the appetite and supports those who are too thin in regaining healthy weight.

Betony increases tone throughout the body, so can assist with prolapses of the uterus and other organs. It is used for weak labour, excessive menstrual bleeding, poor respiration, debility, and liver and gallbladder problems.

Like self-heal, wood betony is a good choice for when you don't quite feel well but don't really know what the problem is.

Wood betony in a Lincolnshire meadow, June

Harvesting wood betony

Pick the plant just before the flowers fully open. To dry for a tea or pillow, spread on a screen or brown paper in the sun. When dry and crisp, put into brown paper bags or jars to store.

Wood betony tea

Use 2 teaspoonfuls of the fresh herb or 1 teaspoonful of the dried herb per cup of boiling water, and leave to infuse for 10 to 15 minutes.

Dose: 3 cups a day, or 1 cup at bedtime to relax for a good night's sleep.

Wood betony tea

- insomnia
- digestive problems
- headache
- poor circulation
- low appetite
- muscular tension
- nightmares
- sinus congestion
- watery, irritated eyes
- head colds
- chills and fevers

Wood betony tincture

Put fresh **wood betony herb** in a blender with enough **vodka or brandy** to cover. Blend briefly, then pour into a jar and put in a cool dark place for a week. Strain off the liquid, bottle and label.

Dose: Wood betony often works very well in drop doses. Take 5–10 drops in a little water three times a day. For insomnia, take 10 drops at bedtime. For more of a tonic effect, take 1 teaspoonful three times a day.

Wood betony tincture

- headache
- feeling of spaciness
- digestive problems
- vertigo
- memory loss
- nervous exhaustion
- anxiety
- irritability
- poor concentration

Wood betony ointment

Pick a handful of **wood betony leaves**, and put them in a small saucepan with 100ml of **extra virgin olive oil**. Using a low heat, warm gently,

just below simmering, until the leaves have lost their green colour and are quite crisp. Strain, returning the oil to the pan.

Add 10g **beeswax** and warm until it melts. Stir well and pour into jars. Leave the lids off until the ointment sets, then label and store in a cool place until needed.

Wood betony ointment
- bruises
- sprains
- strains
- varicose veins
- haemorrhoids

Wood betony pillow

Sew a small cloth bag, leaving one end open. Fill loosely with dried wood betony leaves. Some dried lavender flowers or rose petals can be added for their fragrance. Stitch or tie up the open end, and place the bag under your pillow.

Wood betony pillow
- insomnia
- nightmares

Wood betony, hawthorn and horseradish formula

To make 100ml, mix 50ml **wood betony tincture**, 40ml **hawthorn tincture or syrup** and 10ml of **horseradish vinegar**. This formula stimulates and warms, improving digestion, circulation and memory.

Dose: 1 teaspoon morning and afternoon as a tonic for older people or anyone recovering from a long illness. Also great for exam time!

Wood betony, hawthorn and horseradish formula
- tonic for older people
- convalescence
- exams

Caution: Do not take during pregnancy.

Yarrow

Achillea millefolium

Yarrow or milfoil is a leading hedgerow medicine plant. A ready first-aid treatment for wounds and nosebleeds, it has larger uses as a circulatory system remedy that both stops bleeding and moves stagnant blood, preventing and clearing blood clots. It tones the blood vessels and lowers high blood pressure.

Yarrow is beneficial for a wide range of menstrual problems, and is a first-rate fever herb, used as a hot tea to induce sweating.

Asteraceae (Compositae) Daisy family

Description: A short perennial with feathery dark green leaves and flat heads of white or sometimes pink flowers.

Habitat: Roadsides, meadows and lawns.

Distribution: Everywhere in the British Isles.

Related species: Sneezewort (*A. ptarmica*) is found on heaths and acid soils.

Parts used: Above-ground parts collected when flowering, or leaves gathered as needed.

Cautions: Yarrow can occasionally cause an allergic skin irritation. It is best not given to children under 5 years old, or taken by pregnant or breastfeeding women.

Yarrow is a famous wound and fever herb, yet today it can pass unnoticed except as a lawn weed. The legendary Achilles used yarrow as a field dressing for his soldiers' wounds in the Trojan war, and the plant is named for him. A pity, then, he had none handy for his own fatal heel wound!

Use yarrow for…

Yarrow is our favourite remedy for nosebleeds, and we advise keeping a patch by the back door if anyone in your family suffers from them. Simply pick a few fresh leaves – available year round, though at their best in spring and autumn – and rub them between your hands to bruise them, releasing the aromatic oil. Roll the leaves into a nasal plug, insert into the affected nostril and leave until the bleeding completely stops before gently removing the plug.

Julie’s father was staying with us once and suffered a really bad nosebleed in the middle of the night, but luckily we had a patch of yarrow close by and the bleeding was soon stopped.

Yarrow has a reputation of being able to start a nosebleed as well as stop one, from a time when bleeding was a traditional cure for headache and migraine. Indeed, one of the plant’s old names was ‘nosebleed’.

It is certainly as effective at breaking up congealed blood as it is at stopping haemorrhages, making it a valuable first-aid remedy for thrombosis, for blood blisters and bruises with bleeding beneath the skin, as well as haemorrhoids. If treating for haemorrhoids, take yarrow tea or tincture internally, and place a yarrow poultice or compress over the affected area.

This special ability to both stop bleeding and break up stagnant blood makes yarrow a valuable menstrual remedy. It will correct both heavy and suppressed periods, and will normalise blood flow if there is clotting.

It is also a remedy for vaginal discharge and helps prevent painful periods. Austrian herbalist Maria Treben considered yarrow ‘first and foremost a herb for women’.

This has truth, but the plant’s old names of soldier’s woundwort and knight’s milfoil bring us back once more to yarrow’s affinity for battlefields and for being a wound-packing material, probably long before the Achilles myth was recorded. Its use paralleled the development of weapons, and it was the *herba militaris*, the herb dressing carried by battle surgeons around the world until at least the American Civil War.

Yarrow has long had a particular repute for closing bleeding wounds caused by weapons or tools made of iron. In France it is called the *herbe au charpentier* (English version: carpenter’s grass) for the same reason. It is useful to know in case of domestic or outdoor accidents that yarrow’s emergency help can be at hand. Find a plant, strip the leaves, crush them

and pack into the wound: it is antibacterial and antimicrobial so you will not introduce infection.

The reason why yarrow is so versatile – it was known as a ‘cure-all’ herb – is that it works to tone the blood vessels, especially the smaller veins, and lower blood pressure by dilating the capillaries. This means it has a beneficial whole-body effect through the blood system, especially on conditions related to hypertension and including coronary thrombosis.

Yarrow has proved beneficial in the treatment of so many illnesses and afflictions that no garden should be without it.
– Roberts (1983)

Achillea *is an important diaphoretic herb, and is a standard remedy for helping the body deal with fever. It stimulates digestion and tones blood vessels.*
– Hoffmann (2003)

… Any treatment for external and internal haemorrhage calls for the inclusion of Yarrow.… I cannot imagine dealing effectively with painful periods or with high blood pressure if the prescription did not include a small but positive amount of Yarrow.
– Barker (2001)

But there is another range of bodily ills for which yarrow is well recommended, and this is in reducing fevers. By relaxing the skin, yarrow will open the pores to allow copious sweating and the release of toxins. Yarrow taken as tea or as a bath at the beginning of a fever or ’flu is an excellent way to reduce the body temperature. It is a herb for measles and chicken pox, and it is safe for children. It was once called ‘Englishman’s quinine’ for a claimed benefit for treating ague (a form of malaria).

The sweating/purifying/relaxing effects are enhanced, herbalists have found, by combining equal quantities of yarrow, peppermint and elderflower in a tea, drunk as hot and as often as the patient can stand. The same mix works well as a skin lotion or in a bath. The equivalent

mixture for high blood pressure is yarrow plus nettle and lime blossom, again taken as a tea.

Yarrow has various other health benefits, as befits its all-rounder status. Its effect on bodily fluids helps in cases of diarrhoea and dysentery. It is effective for colic and blockages of the urogenital area, as also for stomach cramps, cystitis, arthritis and rheumatism.

A yarrow lotion makes a good eyebath and stimulates the scalp, with traditional benefit to the hair; plugs of crushed leaves help to relieve toothache or earache.

Yarrow has a further dimension to its long human history: it is a herb of divination, used by the Druids for predicting the weather, by the Chinese for auguries (in the *Book of Changes* or *I Ching*), and by lovelorn English maidens for indicating who their true love would be. One chant from East Anglia links the yarrow of blood and the yarrow of foretelling:

Yarroway, yarroway, bear a white blow/ If my love love me, my nose will bleed now.

These were benign uses, but the past is not one-sided and yarrow also had a shadow side, being the ‘devil’s nettle’ and ‘bad man’s plaything’. For the most part it was involved in sympathetic magic, as in its part in St John’s day celebrations (see page 161).

All this virtue, and a little vice, comes with a tally of yarrow’s profit and loss account. No question, it is one of the great presences in western herbalism. At the same time, some cautions should be noted.

Yarrow has a stimulating effect on uterine contractions, so is best avoided in pregnancy; prolonged use externally can, in some people, cause allergic rashes and make the skin ultra-sensitive to sunlight; large doses can cause headaches.

You should also be aware that the active constituents of yarrow vary from plant to plant and by locality. If you try yarrow for any of the uses we

have outlined and it seems to be ineffective, go to another plant and use that.

Milfoil is always the greatest boon, wherever it grows wild in the country.… It should on no account be weeded out. Like sympathetic people in human society, who have a favourable influence by their mere presence … so milfoil, in a district where it is plentiful, works beneficially by its mere presence.
– Steiner (early 20th century)

Yarrow by Maria Merian (1717)

Fresh leaf
• nosebleeds
• cuts and wounds

Harvesting yarrow

Yarrow leaves are evergreen so can be harvested fresh almost whenever they are needed. To make a tincture or when drying for tea, yarrow is best gathered while flowering. Yarrow accumulates particulates from exhausts because of the large surface area of its flowerhead and leaves, so it is best to pick it away from busy roads.

To dry your yarrow, hang whole stems in bunches or place them on brown paper in an airing cupboard. Allow a month, and once they are dry, strip the leaves and flowers off the stems and crumble for use as a tea. Smaller stems can be chopped up with scissors, but the larger stems are usually discarded. Keep the leaves dry and you can use them for months, or find fresh leaves for a green tea.

Yarrow tea

Use 1 heaped teaspoonful of **dried yarrow** per cup or mug of **boiling water**, and let it infuse for 10 minutes. Strain and drink hot.

Dose: For colds and feverish conditions, drink a cupful hot every two hours until there is an improvement, and continue drinking three cups a day until you are well. For chronic conditions, drink three cups a day. For fevers, yarrow combines well with mint and elderflower. Use externally as a wash for cuts, and as a hair rinse for a healthy scalp and shiny hair.

Yarrow tea
- colds and fevers
- scanty menstruation
- heavy periods
- menstrual clotting
- high blood pressure
- to tone varicose veins
- to prevent blood clots
- tension
- weak digestion

Yarrow tincture

Chop up **fresh yarrow leaves and flowers**, and put in a jar. Pour in enough **vodka** to cover, put the lid on and place the jar in a dark cupboard for two weeks. Shake it every few days. Strain and bottle.

Dose: 20 drops in water, three times a day.

Yarrow tincture
- scanty menstruation
- heavy periods
- menstrual clotting
- high blood pressure
- to tone varicose veins
- to prevent blood clots
- tension
- weak digestion

Ointment for haemorrhoids

Gently heat 10g **dried yarrow** and 10g **dried raspberry leaf** or 10g **horse chestnut leaf** with 100ml **extra virgin olive oil** in a small saucepan for 15 minutes, stirring frequently. Strain out the herbs and return the oil to the pan. Add about 10g **beeswax** and stir until melted. Use enough beeswax to set the ointment – test a few drops on a cold

saucer as you do when making jam. If the weather is hot, you will want to use more beeswax than if the weather is cold.

Apply the ointment externally a couple of times a day as needed. It can also be used on bruises, varicose veins and thread veins.

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Hawthorn in flower, verdant sunlit meadows and hedges, mature trees, a ruined church and a working farm: hedge-defined rural England as it might have looked a century ago. Bunkers Hill, Edgefield, Norfolk, May

Notes to the text

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Relevant UK legislation on harvesting wild plants includes the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, www.legislation.gov.uk. These serve, along with common law, to give reasonable guidance. Rare wild plants are protected under the 1981 Act in a regularly revised schedule of endangered species. No such plant is included in this book. The uprooting of wild plants is forbidden in the same Act, unless with permission of the owner of the land where the digging takes place (easy if it's your own property!). Custom in the form of common law gives the right to wild-gather the 'four Fs' of fruit, foliage, fungi and flowers, for personal use and not resale. Rights of way law covers where you can go to do this, eg footpaths, common land and certain woodlands. See 'Conservation and the Law' in John Wright's excellent foraging guide, *Hedgerow* (2010), 20–9.

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Resources

Finding a herbal practitioner

To find a qualified herbalist near you, contact the professional associations listed below, or check with your local complementary therapy clinic.

Association of Master Herbalists
01452 730 745
www.associationofmasterherbalists.co.uk

The College of Practitioners of Phytotherapy
01323 484 353
www.phytotherapists.org

The International Register of Consultant Herbalists and Homoeopaths (IRCH)
01594 368 443
www.irch.org

National Institute of Medical Herbalists (NIMH)
01392 426 022
www.nimh.org.uk

Unified Register of Herbal Practitioners (URHP)
07539 528 857
www.urhp.com

Suppliers

You can find most of what you need in grocery and hardware stores. Here are a few suppliers who carry some of the harder-to-source supplies you might want.

G Baldwin & Co
020 7703 5550
www.baldwins.co.uk
Mail order and shop: Brown glass bottles, lanolin, beeswax; also dried herbs, essential oils.

Lakeland Ltd
01539 488 100
www.lakeland.co.uk
Mail order and shops: Jam- and jelly-making supplies, kitchen equipment.

Just Botanics
01291 635 525
www.justbotanics.co.uk
Mail order for tinctures, oils, dried herbs, gums, resins, powders and empty capsules.

The London Teapot Company
0845 230 4566
www.chatsford.com

Mail order, manufacturer: Chatsford teapots with basket strainers for loose teas.

Workshops

Hedgerow Medicine
www.hedgerowmedicine.com
The authors' website, offering workshops, short courses, newsletter with seasonal recipes etc.

Plant information

Henriette Kress
www.henriettesherbal.com
Herbal information website, with texts of many older herbals.

The Herb Society
0845 491 8699
www.herbsociety.org.uk
Promotes interest in all aspects of herbal use, runs a national herb garden at Sulgrave Manor and publishes *Herbs* magazine.

Plantlife International
01722 342 730
www.plantlife.org.uk
The wild-plant conservation charity.

The Wildlife Trusts
01636 677 711
www.wildlifetrusts.org
Local groups, nature reserves.

Seeds and plants

Many nurseries now sell wildflower seeds and plants. We've listed our two favourite mail-order companies.

Poyntzfield Herb Nursery
01381 610 352
www.poyntzfieldherbs.co.uk
Seeds and plants.

Suffolk Herbs
01376 570 000
www.kingsseeds.com
Seeds of native plants.

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honeys, herbal 1, 2, 3
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    recipes 1
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    recipes 1
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    harvesting 1;
    recipes 1
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    recipes 1
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    recipes 1
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    harvesting 1, 2;
    recipes 1
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O

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Plantago major **1**, 2
Plantago media **1**
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    recipes 1
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    recipes 1
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    recipes 1
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Rumex crispus **1**

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Salix spp. **1**
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    recipes 1
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    recipes 1
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Stellaria media **1**
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    acid 1, 2, 3, 4, 5;
    nervous 1, 2, 3, 4;
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T
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    prolapse 1, 2;
    tonic 1

V

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    infection 1
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Verbena officinalis **1**
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    recipes 1
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vitamin B complex 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
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vitamin K 1, 2
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harvesting 1;
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recipes 1
wild rose 1, 2, **3**;
recipes 1
willow 1, 2, **3**, 4;
recipes 1
willowherb **1**;
harvesting 1;
recipe 1
wood betony 1, 2, **3**;
harvesting 1;
recipes 1
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worms 1
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XYZ
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harvesting 1;
recipes 1

The Authors

JULIE BRUTON-SEAL is a practising medical herbalist, iridologist and craniosacral therapist. A council member of the Association of Master Herbalists (AMH), she is also a writer, photographer, artist and graphic designer. Julie co-authored the vegetarian cookbook *Vegetarian Masterpieces* (1988)

MATTHEW SEAL has worked as an editor and writer in books, magazines and newspapers for over forty years, in both the UK and South Africa. He is author of *Survive and Thrive in the New South Africa* (2000), and was the founder of the Professional Editors' Group there in 1993. He has served as the publications director of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP)

Julie and Matthew teach courses and workshops in herbal medicine.

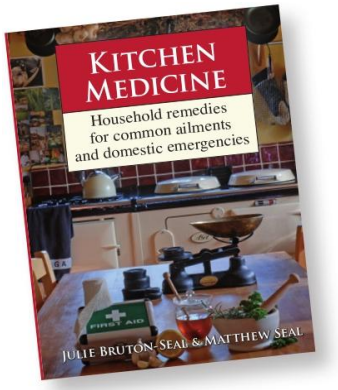
For more information, see their website:

www.hedgerowmedicine.com

Other books by Julie and Matthew:

Kitchen Medicine

Household Remedies for Common Ailments & Domestic Emergencies


KITCHEN MEDICINE
Household remedies for common ailments and domestic emergencies
FIRST AID
JULIE BRUTON-SEAL & MATTHEW SEAL

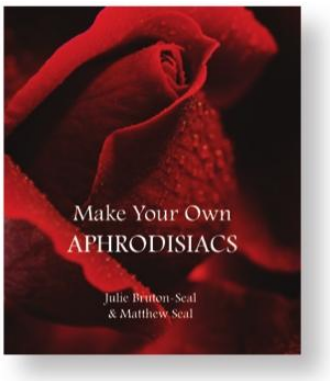
You have a pharmacy at your fingertips in your own pantry, and this practical book shows you how to use herbs, spices, fruits, vegetables, oils, vinegars and other familiar kitchen items to treat common ailments.

This is the best book I have ever seen on this subject and I just want to buy it for everyone I know! It is a great resource, an inspiration, a thing of great beauty and healing. Everyone should have a copy in their kitchens!

– Permaculture Magazine

Make Your Own Aphrodisiacs

This attractive book is full of delicious recipes for romance, and is sumptuously illustrated.



From ashwagandha to yohimbe via chocolate, roses, horny goat weed and more, this is a guide to herbs that really work as aphrodisiacs. Many of these herbs are also rejuvenating tonics.

It was published in North America as *Aphrodisia: homemade potions to make love more likely, more pleasurable and more possible.*

This would make a lovely Christmas present or indeed a fun, but informative, gift for lovers of both plants and people at any time of the year. I liked its small size – handy for the bedroom – and the rich, colourful pictures lend themselves very well to romance and the love of life in general. – The Herbalist

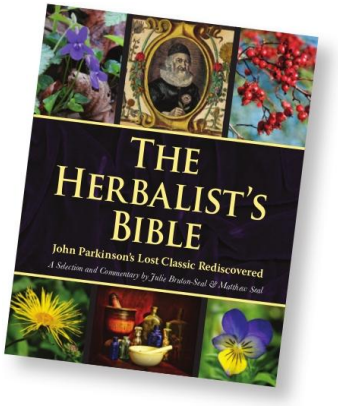
The Herbalist's Bible

John Parkinson's Lost Classic Rediscovered

Excerpts from and commentary on the best herbal ever written in English, John Parkinson's *magnum opus*, the largely forgotten *Theatrum Botanicum* or *Theater of Plants* (1640).

Herbalist to King Charles I, John Parkinson (1567–1650) was a master apothecary, gardener and herbalist who spent 50 years collecting information for his herbal.

His enthusiasm for the plants comes through clearly in his Vertues (medicinal uses) for the selected plants, and his original text is accompanied by Julie and Matthew's comments on their experience of the plants and their use since Parkinson's time.


THE HERBALIST'S BIBLE
John Parkinson's Lost Classic Rediscovered
A Selection and Commentary by Julie Bruton-Seal & Matthew Seal

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